

World Service

BBC World Service can be received in Western Europe on medium wave 640-1412 (463m) at the following times GMT (add one hour for BST):

4.45 am News in English and French. 5.00 News; Twenty-Four Hours. 5.30 London Morning. 6.0 Newsdesk. 6.30 Meridian. 7.0 am News; Twenty-Four Hours; Financial News. 7.30 Ten Years of Mrs Thatcher. 8.0 News; Words of Faith. 8.15 Music Review. 9.0 News; Review of the British Press. 9.15 The World Today. 9.30 Financial News; Sports Roundup. 9.45 Seven Seas. 10.0 News; Focus on Faith. 10.30 London Morning.

11.10 News; News about Britain. 11.45 Talking From. 11.30 Meridian. 12.0 Newsdesk. 12.15 Ten Years of Mrs Thatcher. 12.45 Sports Roundup. 1.0 News; Twenty-Four Hours; Financial News. 1.30 John Peel. 2.0 News; Outlook. 2.45 Nature Now. 3.0 Newsdesk. 3.15 BBC English. 3.30 Haute.

MAN WITH terminal condition, not incapacitated as yet, seeks hazardous work for highest pay.
BOX 315

The Terminal Man

**Philip
H.
Turner**

7.45 Here's Humph! 8.0 News; The World Today. 8.25 Words of Faith. 8.30 Science in Action. 9.0 News; Sports Roundup. 9.15 Sing Gospel. 9.30 People and Politics. 10.0 Newshour. 11.0 News; Commentary. 11.15 From the Weeklies. 11.30 Multitrack 3. 12.0 Newsdesk. 12.30 Personal View. 12.45 Recording of the Week. 1.0 Outlook; Financial News. 1.30 Poetry of the Century. 1.45 Book Choice. 1.50 New Ideas. 2.0 News; Review of

John A. Scott

THE TERMINAL MAN

a novel by

Philip Turner

Immortality is the young man's game. Life seems to go on forever in an unbroken stream that ends in the far future – certainly too far away to be of any concern. And then, one day, along comes the realization that the far future might not be all that far away after all.

How should a rational, methodical man face up to that grim prospect? With resignation? With acceptance? With hope? Or should he choose to confront the possibility of impending extinction head on and take extraordinary steps to cram as much as possible into whatever time is left, knowing that no matter how much trouble it gets him into, he might not have to live long with the consequences?

This is how one man dealt with his personal version of the problem of uncertainty, and his solution to it.

Robert Helm opted for a wild ride which took him from England to Greece, Austria, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Italy. He moved among men worth millions, and even billions, and he staked his life for so many thousands of dollars that the numbers began to lose all meaning.

Helm became involved in games, some with a deadly purpose, and international conspiracies, one of which was aimed at saving the world with an act of monumental destruction. His initial object was to raise enough money to enjoy himself in case the news from his doctor was grave; in a literal sense. He soon found that he had no guarantee of staying alive to spend his earnings; unless he got really creative.

J&J
BOOKS

By the same author

Calling Cards	The Charmian Effect
The Cold Fire of Madness	Counting Out Time
The Adventure of the Dying Detective	Descending Waves
Dark Horses Run Deep	Free Flight
Motive Power	Night Flowers
Not To Be!	Observe & Report
On Borrowed Time	The Red Star Brigade
Roundabout	Pass The Parcel
The Savage Jaw	Storm Tide
Sounds Carried On The Breeze	The Terminal Man

The Windrell Sequence:

01. Windrell **	02. A Place In Time **
03. In The Quiet Of His Room	04. Candle To The Shell
05. Aftershock	06. Eon's Height
07. The Juice Of The Poppy	08. The Night Knows No Ending
09. An Untimely Frost	10. The Second Time Around
11. The Last VCs **	** in preparation

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The author asserts his moral right of identification.

This novel, a range of other novels and a large collection of short stories are all available in HTML and/or PDF format on the Romiley Literary website, which can be accessed via a link on the Farrago & Farrago website, whose url is:

www.farrago2.co.uk

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What They Said About This Book . . .

Redefines *tour de force*.

Language Now

. . . amounts to a disgraceful slander on the good name of our nation

. . .

Greek National Tourist Board

The definitive comic novel of the Eighties. Not to be missed. Pity it didn't appear in print until the end of the Nineties.

Language + Literature

A classic study of the psychopathology of despair . . .

The Mental Image

Book of the Year – This year, next year, every year!

The Independent Publisher

This is the end.

Jim Morrison

“Vive memor leti.”
[Live mindful of death.]

Aulus Persius Flaccus (AD 34-62)

The entry in my diary on the day in 1988 after I got *my* letter from the Blood Transfusion Service contains a joke: ‘The time to worry about anaemia is when you cut your finger and it bleeds clear.’ That was the first letter. A couple of weeks later, I heard from my doctor that I was seriously short of haemoglobin. I got the diagnosis six weeks later – one week after I started this book. In my case, the terminal condition was easily containable if not yet curable. Which just goes to show – if the Gods have got it in for you, there’s not a lot you can do about it!

The Author.

I. THE SPY GAME

AS HE BEGAN his contact schedule at the Tower of London, Robert Helm just knew that the job would turn him into an outlaw – but that was just too bad. His instructions were to spend exactly four minutes at each tower, following the tour route in the guide book and ignoring the soreness around the stitches in his side, until someone approached him. He felt sure that he looked to everyone else like a furtive, untried jewel-thief. He hoped to hell that he wouldn't attract the attention of the Tower's security staff.

He started his circuit at the Bell Tower at eleven o'clock on an overcast Wednesday morning in the middle of August. He was surrounded by tourists on an distinctly unsummery day. The man who had replied to his newspaper advertisement by telephone hadn't asked for much detail in the description department.

The client was looking out for a man in his early thirties, who was wearing a blue anorak in case of rain and jeans, who was about six feet tall and of average build, and who had a pale complexion. Helm had been willing to carry on describing himself down to the scars on his right forearm and his left knee, and to wear a green carnation and hold a copy of *The Times* in an artificially conspicuous manner. The man on the phone had ended their conversation abruptly, however, as if someone had walked in on him.

A young blonde in a leather jacket and skin-tight jeans had been looking him over but it was a middle-aged man who made contact with Helm at the White Tower. The client was half a head shorter than Helm, well tanned and solidly built. A dark green cloth cap drooped over his eyes.

The deep collar of his black raincoat was turned up to protect his ears from the chilly wind. He carried a black cigarillo cupped in his left hand for the same reason. Something about him that made Helm wonder if MI-5 recruited expendable agents from newspaper adverts.

"You Box Three-Fifteen?" The man quoted the reference number from

one of the newspaper advertisements in what sounded like a natural London accent.

"That's right." Helm tried to project confidence.

"You're all right to travel? After going to hospital yesterday?" The client turned to the stairs leading up to the execution block and the parade ground.

"I guess so," Helm said too casually. "My fees start at twenty-five thousand pounds sterling, in advance, plus expenses. Just so we know where we are."

"I must say, you're not looking too hot." The client looked Helm over with a sceptical gaze. "You weren't exaggerating in your advert, were you?"

Helm shrugged. "Depends what you want me to do. Obviously, anything strenuous like delivering boxes of *Milk Tray* is right out."

"The job is to photograph someone. Make a video of him, in fact. The only problem is, he's a very private man. He has people around to make sure no one points a camera at him. And he has a lot of pull with the local police. If his bodyguards hit someone a bit too hard, it can be covered up. You don't look like you can take much punishment."

"You pay, I'll take the risks." Helm began to feel glad that he had set his price at 'outrageous'. "What do I call you?"

"Bateman." No first name was offered. "The job's in Greece. Got a passport you can use?"

"I've got a full British passport I can use."

"It had better be Irish. We can see about that."

"How long will the job take? How long can it take?"

"No more than a week. You going to be alive for that long?"

"I'll give it my best shot. The guy I have to video. Does he ever go out in public? I mean, he's not another Howard Hughes?"

"He does go out," nodded Bateman. "But he's protected when he does."

"I'll think of something." Helm forced himself into a positive mental attitude. He was prepared to exert himself for £25,000.

"This job works like a marine salvage contract. No cure, no pay. No video and we'll want the twenty-five grand back and you'll pay your own expenses. And find your own way home."

"That goes without saying."

"Good. I'll meet you at W.H. Smith's at Victoria Station at two o'clock to finalize the arrangements."

Bateman stopped walking to study the map in his guidebook. Helm read the inscription at the side of the execution block then he headed for the armouries. He left the Tower at noon and headed up-river. If Bateman was serious, he want a man in a terminal condition to travel to

Greece on a false Irish passport. Bateman was willing to pay a hell of a lot of cold cash for his video-recording of a private man, whose bodyguards might kill the cameraman.

Helm felt an impulse, which he resisted firmly, to dash back to his car and break all records to his home near Maidstone. At the same time, he had a sensation of walking about six inches above the pavement. He could do a lot of high-speed jet-setting with £25,000.

Helm fortified himself with a pub lunch of sausage sandwiches and a pint of bitter. In his present condition, one pint was his limit. He found Bateman inspecting a rack of paperbacks when he reached Victoria station. Helm decided that the older man looked like either a gangster or a retired copper.

Without looking directly at Helm, Bateman set off on a walkabout. Helm had his first twinges of real doubt when they stopped at a photo-booth. Bateman had clearly reached a destination.

"This passport, it's a good one?" Helm remarked when they were waiting for the machine to deliver his prints.

"From a bent Irish consular official," said Bateman. "It's the real thing, and it'll go on the books as officially issued. Your driving licence. Clean, is it?"

Helm took out his wallet. Bateman scanned the licence, then handed it back. The strip of photographs dropped into the collection slot. Bateman took charge of it. Helm followed him to a bench. Bateman handed him an A5-size, stiff-backed notebook from a side pocket of his black raincoat. He looked cold and he would have looked pale if not for his tan. Bateman was clearly used to much warmer weather. Inside the notebook was part of a passport application form. Helm dug out a ballpoint. Bateman took out a smaller, police-style notebook from an inside pocket and flicked through the pages.

"This one's close enough," he decided. "Profession – engineer," he added at dictation speed. "Date of birth – July twelfth. Age – thirty-one. Country of residence – England. Use your own height and so on."

"Six-one, blue eyes, black hair, no special peculiarities," muttered Helm. "What about the signature?"

"John A Scott. A for Albert. Try it out in the notebook first."

Helm filled two columns on a blank page. He settled on a flowing signature in which the 'J' was a single, downward stroke and hook without a crossbar. Bateman tore the page out of the notebook and gave it to him.

"Practise that at home. And remember, your birthday's now July the twelfth and your star sign's Cancer not Leo. Maybe we should have picked another one. But it's too late now."

Helm's sick smile cheered up when Bateman took a long manilla

envelope from his other raincoat pocket.

"I'll give you the completed passport at the buffet bar at Euston station at half-six. Be ready to go tomorrow." Bateman looked at his gold wristwatch. "You've got plenty of time to do some shopping. Take all new stuff to Greece, okay? And remember your name's Scott now. You'll have a contact over there called Lane. It'll always be Mr. Scott calling Mr. Lane when you phone him. But if you're in trouble, or you think someone's listening in, you'll say John Scott calling Mr. Lane as a warning. Got it?"

"Mister if it's safe, John if it isn't. Okay. See you at six-thirty," Helm said cheerfully.

"And I'll see you, Mr. Helm," Bateman returned with a smile that seemed sinister in retrospect.

As he left the station, Helm realized that Bateman had gleaned a lot of useful information from his driving licence – name, address, date of birth. If Helm tried a double-cross, Bateman would be able to check round in a few computers and apply pressure – either directly to Helm himself or indirectly on his family. A man who handed out envelopes of cash had to have that sort of access to electronic libraries of personal information.

Continuing with his plan, Helm deposited £24,500 in his building society account. He had stuffed his passbook into his inside pocket on the way out of the house as a gesture of confidence that he would not be wasting a day. He made a remark about what a wonderful institution the bookmaker is as a clerk with a glazed expression counted 490 £50 notes.

Bateman had told him to get a haircut so that he would not look exactly like his passport photograph. Shorn, shopping over, Helm spend the rest of the afternoon in a cinema watching a blood-and-thunder epic featuring CIA and KGB agents working separately to create a joint *Allah's Thunder*.

At their next meeting, Bateman gave him a UK driving licence to match his Irish Republic passport. The envelope also contained a book of dollar traveller's cheques and a one-way air ticket to Athens. Helm worked out an emergency plan during his journey home. If he got into real trouble, he would ditch his false identity, present himself at the nearest British embassy and say that his passport had been stolen. He could even quote the number to speed up checks. Bad guys looking for an Irishman called Scott would not be interested in an Englishman called Helm. He hoped.

The next morning, he remembered to ring his local health centre. He told the receptionist that he had to go abroad on business and he would

ring about his test results when he got back. It was a quick, impersonal conversation, apparently about an entirely routine matter. The receptionist was unaware that the life and death of Robert Helm could hang on an examination of the waxy blob snatched by a surgeon from his left lung.

As far as Helm was concerned, he could go out with a bang, if necessary, now that he had added £24,000 to his savings. The test results were no longer important.

He wondered whether to attempt an Irish accent as he travelled by Tube out to Heathrow. He decided instead to say as little as possible and try to mimic his consultant's upper-class accent. He had seen titled Scotsmen on TV programmes and they all seemed to have an English public-school accent. It was reasonable to suppose that moneyed families in the Irish Republic would give their children the same educational advantage.

Helm was travelling light. He had filled a cabin bag with new underwear and socks, a pair of jeans, sweatshirts, a light plastic anorak, a spare pair of shoes, shaving tackle, a basic medical kit and some thick paperbacks. He was wearing a good pair of trousers and a smart leather jacket. If he needed anything else, he planned to buy it on expenses to the benefit of the Greek economy.

To his surprise, the people at the airport called him 'Mr. Scott' and no hard-eyed men in dark suits, clones of 'Mr. Bateman', closed in to arrest him for travelling on a false passport. The wait for his flight was an hour and a half of agony. Helm kept telling himself that having an Irish passport didn't make him an automatic terrorist suspect. He knew that not every Irishman is a card-carrying member of the IRA, even if they behave like it when the British want to extradite a killer or an accessory to mass slaughter.

He was still struggling with his unbridgeable gap between knowing and believing when his flight was called. Sitting down on the airliner was a positive relief. Helm was sure that he has staggered along the boarding pier, twitching furiously. He hoped that the cabin staff had marked him down as a nervous flier rather than a potential hi-jacker. He felt a whole lot better after a gin and tonic, and he was able to read his book rather than staring at pages of printed words while taking nothing in.

He studied his Greek phrasebook and a pocket dictionary at intervals through the three-and-a-half-hour flight. He remained unable to understand why the word 'masturbate' had been included in the pocket dictionary in a position that made it a key word printed in bold type at the top of one of the pages.

He had examined other volumes of the series in the bookshop when

he had come across that key word during a pre-purchase flick through the pages. That word had replaced 'masticate' and 'mastiff' in the French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish pocket dictionaries. He remained unsure whether the need for the word said something significant about the Greeks – or the attitude toward them of whoever had compiled the dictionary.

It was not until he left the airliner at Athens airport that he asked himself what the hell he was doing. He was in a foreign country with very little command of the language and travelling on an illegally issued passport. His dodgy job was worth £25,000 plus expenses to someone, but Robert Helm, alias John Scott, didn't have the first idea how he was going to tackle it.

According to the stamps in it, John Albert Scott's passport had been abroad eight times in the last three years. Helm was relieved to pass through customs and immigration at the same speed as other visitors from members states of the European club. He had been on holiday to France, Germany and Denmark, but he had never travelled as far as Greece before.

Athens is the open gateway to Europe for whole gangs of Arab terrorists, according to the newspapers. False passports had to be an everyday sight, Helm told himself. He gained the impression that he would have to have a machine gun slung on his shoulder before anyone stopped him.

He paid 100 drachmas to travel on the airport bus to the ferry terminal at Piraeus. He spent half an hour looking down the wrong side streets for the garage, visiting the quayside several times during his travels. He had seen fishermen on television tenderizing octopuses by beating them against a wall, Seeing it happen for real was a mildly shocking experience, which confirmed that all foreigners are a bunch of barbarians at heart.

He hoped that the recipients of the rubbery slaps were completely dead, recalling that Mediterranean fishermen kill an octopus by biting it between the eyes. He also remembered that marine biologists consider octopuses to be relatively intelligent creatures. Helm resolved, on the spot, that he would not be bullied into sampling that particular local delicacy, even if some hairy Greek pointed a gun at him.

The garage came out of hiding eventually. A sad-looking man with slicked-back hair and a mucky face wiped his hands on greasy, blue overalls, then gave Helm the keys of a battered, blue Fiat *Uno* and a greasy envelope, in which was a non-greasy sheet of paper with a hand-written telephone number and a typed list of address.

The mechanic recommended a flat in Valaki, which belonged to his cousin, as a good place to stay. Realizing that a back-hander was

involved, Helm accepted the recommendation in return for a full tank of petrol.

The first-floor studio flat on the seaward side of the coast road had its own external staircase to make it independent of the one below. Although the accommodation was spartan, it was perfectly clean and the plumbing worked. Helm found that the flat had some rather disconcerting touches of rural charm, such as the emergency candles and the thermal blanket for the fridge – a space-age metallized plastic sheet for keeping the heat out if the power went off. But he expected to be away from the area long before the novelty wore off. He tested the phone by calling the number supplied by the mechanic. There was a letter waiting for John Scott at the main post office in Athens.

His landlady, a black-clad, middle-aged woman with a rather oppressed expression, looked slightly less suicidal when he paid her four weeks' rent in advance. It seemed rather a waste if he had just one week to complete the job, but Bateman's orders had been quite specific. Helm dumped his cabin bag in the bedroom, thought about unpacking and set off instead for the city to get on with his job.

He found his way to Eolou Street on main roads – after nearly killing a mangy donkey two kilometres out of Valaki. The beast just wandered across the road in front of him without looking to left or right, forcing a violent braking manoeuvre.

A mild skid on the dusty road helped neither the state of his nerves nor his temper. He was finding the weather much too hot. It made him feel sticky and sweaty, and his sunglasses had too weak a tint to reduce the glare to a comfortable level.

He nearly hit a reckless driver in a Renault dodgem car while he was watching a cream and green, Athenian trolley bus. Trolley buses were being touted as the next step to pollution-free public transport in England. Helm was surprised to find them an essential part of life in the Old World.

He collected a plain, manilla business envelope at the poste restante section of the central post office – a busy place full of excitable foreigners. His latest envelope contained an old newspaper photograph and a sheet of A4 typing paper, which had been folded twice. His contact had supplied him with a list of places and times. They were the daily routine of a man with plenty of money, who enjoyed his leisure.

Four-thirty on a hot afternoon was too late to start any serious work. Helm decided to locate the addresses in the city, buying darker sunglasses on the way, and then return to his flat. After an early night and an early start to his Friday, he would be ready to tackle Phileros Makronotis – if he had transliterated the Greek newspaper caption on his cutting correctly.

The picture showed a fat man of around sixty. His white panama hat matched his suit. He seemed to be attending the opening of something fairly significant. Makronotis occupied the entire third floor of the Hotel Renga on Elousis Square, according to the briefing notes. In the picture, he looked filthy rich enough to own the whole building, if not the rest of the square.

Helm parked the Fiat at a meter in the central section of the square. He tried coins until he found one that fitted the slot. After walking slowly past the Hotel Renga, he stopped at a café on the wide strip of pavement.

A waiter brought him a cup of what the menu called *American Coffee*. It tasted remarkably like good old British instant. A glass of *Metaxas* brandy made it more palatable. Looking around from the welcome shade of his table's umbrella, Helm decided that Elousis Square was a typical mixture of venerable hotels and office buildings of the same vintage, modern combinations of shops with offices above them, and the sprinkling of cafés for the tourists. In such an ancient city, the old and the new seemed to mingle more uneasily than elsewhere. Helm was on the wrong side of the square to have a view of the pollution-scarred Akropolis, but he could feel its disapproving presence.

Elousis Square offered a number of possibilities for making a video. Helm knew that he would have to see the security men in action before he made a decision on how to go about fulfilling his contract. When he had finished his coffee, he moved on a quarter of a mile to the Stock Exchange, to which Phileros Makronotis was driven between nine-thirty and ten on weekdays.

The Greek billionaire returned to his base at the hotel at about twelve-thirty, and spent an hour and a half there over lunch. After another session at the stock exchange building instead of an afternoon siesta, he returned to the hotel between four-thirty and five.

Makronotis had no fixed pattern of activity for his evenings. Helm assumed that he took a tribe of bodyguards to an exclusive restaurant or the billionaires' club or his private yacht when he wanted a change from his hotel.

Makronotis had a weekend villa on the east coast, almost thirty kilometres from the city centre in a straight line and on the other side of the peninsula from the airport noise. He also had a yacht berthed at Piraeus, the port city for Athens. A man with so many places to go, Helm decided, had to offer the occasional opportunity to a video cameraman.

Helm paid an outrageous price for an air-freighted copy of Wednesday's *Daily Telegraph* on Friday morning, reminding himself that he was on

expenses, and he arrived at Elousis Square on foot having parked some distance away. He sat down at the same café and ordered more *American Coffee*.

He put a hearing aid-size ear-phone in his left ear and switched on a cheap radio. A news programme was about to start on the BBC World Service. He was surprised to hear a revolutionary ballad used as the signature tune.

Lillibullero, he remembered from a programme about *The Glorious Revolution*, mocked Irish Catholics and had swept James II out of three kingdoms. As the holder of an Irish Republic passport, Helm felt entitled to be offended.

Just before nine-thirty, a burly man dropped heavily onto a chair at the next table. "Good music?" he said to Helm in a jovial tone after spotting his *Telegraph*.

"BBC news." Helm pulled the earphone jack-plug out of the radio to give the other man a burst of a British newsreader.

"Ah, English radio?"

"No, Chinese." Helm turned the back of the radio to the heavyweight and pointed out *Made In Hong Kong* embossed in the red plastic.

"Chinese radio!" His neighbour laughed as if he had just hear the world's funniest joke, then he lit a cigarette.

A financial programme replaced the news. Helm returned the earphone to the compartment inside the plastic case and turned his attention to the newspaper. The waiter noticed his empty cup and hovered. Helm ordered a refill.

Two women on his right were eating what looked like sticky buns with currants. Helm pointed to them and said, "Enas ya may," trying to say 'one for me' in comprehensible Greek.

As the waiter looked toward the other table, Helm experienced a moment of panic. To his relief, the waiter realized that he wanted a sticky bun, not to pick up one of the women. The waiter nodded and headed back inside the café. Helm was glancing through his *Telegraph* when he became aware of something going on in front of the Hotel Renga.

Two men in lightweight suits were wandering about, talking into personal radios. A large, black Mercedes with tinted rear windows drew up moments later. Helm's beefy neighbour flicked a cigarette end over the heads of people on the pavement and into the road. Helm realized that there was something very odd about the man.

The chain-smoker on his left had been sitting at his table for almost ten minutes but none of the waiters had approached him. Helm turned round in his chair to look at the café's entrance, as if wondering if his waiter had sneaked off for a smoke instead of fetching his coffee. He

had a view along the pavement when he looked straight ahead again. He positioned his paper so that no one could tell if he was reading an article at the top of a page or peeping over it at the black Mercedes.

A man in a white suit, fat but not grossly so, strolled out of the hotel and set a straight course for his car. He left avoiding action to other users of his broad stretch of pavement. Helm counted up to ten before the fat man was out of sight again.

The remaining fifty-nine minutes and fifty seconds of a V60 cassette would be extremely blank, Helm told himself, if that was the full extent of Phileros Makronotis' performance.

If the client wanted a full cassette, and Helm could tape four arrivals and departures at the hotel every day, he would be stuck in Athens until around Christmas. Using candles when the lights went out in Valaki would have lost its charm long before then. The thought of a small fortune rotting unspent in his building society account would drive him mad with frustration – if he lived that long.

Helm watched the twelve-thirty exit performance from the stock exchange from the other side of a fairly narrow street, trying to look like someone wondering whether to risk a short sprint in front of speeding cars. The men with radios arrived at 12:28. The Mercedes arrived three minutes later. Phileros Makronotis was out of sight in just four seconds.

Helm had some exotic, foreign food for lunch – fish and chips at what was described as a British restaurant near the town hall. The waiter delivered skinny french fries instead of chunky, deep-fried chips, but the fish was very good and he was hungry.

Helm went exploring after his meal. The city's huge market was an overwhelming sight. The stalls seemed to stretch for miles along a wide, straight road. Helm was prepared to believe that all the fish and vegetables in the world had been gathered in a single display for the people of Athens as a sort of giant, organic sculpture.

There were ouzo joints instead of gin joints in what he thought of as the downtown area, at the foot of the Hill of Ares. The massage parlours and the clubs looked universal, all dedicated to making the customer think that the time that he got was good enough to persuade him to empty his wallet. There were souvenir shops in abundance for the less adventurous visitors.

Helm bought a mid-blue, zip-up jacket and a white sunhat at one shop, and a pair of mirror sunglasses at another. He felt a lot cooler with his leather jacket in a carrier bag. The temperature was in 'phew, what a scorcher!' territory – apparently the August norm for Athens.

The sun felt more like a spray-on tonic on this second day in Greece. The more it shone, the better Helm felt, but he could still appreciate the cool zone downwind of the largest fountain in Sintagma Square.

Helm was glad of his disguise when he returned to Elousis Square. There was a man with a radio on duty at the café in the garden centre, opposite the Hotel Renga. Makronotis emerged just before two o'clock. His bodyguards gave Helm an unrehearsed demonstration of their efficiency.

A woman with a dog, who looked to be on a collision course with their boss, suddenly found herself doing a dance with the radioman. He stepped unerringly into her path as she tried to go round him. Then he turned back to the hotel when Makronotis had reached his car safely.

The black Mercedes, with a different number plate from the morning car, left for the afternoon session at the stock exchange. Helm noticed that the radioman at the café continued to make reports for a further five minutes before returning to the hotel. Wondering about the possibilities of a video-camera concealed in a parcel or an item of personal luggage, Helm returned to his car to consult the road map. He wanted to get out of the city.

Athens is like Los Angeles in that it is surrounded by hills that trap the smog created out of vehicle exhausts. The day before had been a little windier and smog-free. This day was calm, hot and not suitable for someone unused to breathing destructive chemicals.

A cop approached him and started to give him ear-ache in too-rapid Greek. It took some time for Helm to get a word in to explain that he was English and he didn't really speak the language. Eventually, he realized that the cop's sign language meant that he had a car with an odd-numbered registration plate and it was Friday the 20th, an even date. *Avreeo*, tomorrow, was okay but not today.

The cop took charge of his map to explain that parking the car in Piraeus and taking a bus into the city on even dates was the proper thing to do – if he was unable to get hold of a reserve car with even-numbered plates for even dates.

When he had got his message across, the cop seemed quite apologetic about issuing a ticket for a fixed-penalty spot-fine. As he was on expenses, Helm paid up without protest. He did wonder why Bateman had not issued him with two cars, however.

Phileros Makronotis' villa on the opposite coast stood on the highest piece of ground for at least a mile. Helm pulled in to the side of a country road. He strolled across spiky grass toward the sea. There was no clear cliff-edge. The slope just got steeper and steeper until the grass gave up at a rocky slide to a pebble beach. He could see more land across a wide channel – Evvoia and an unresolvable off-shore island, according to his map.

The inevitable ferry was moving from right to left, heading for Rafina

on the mainland. Following its course with his eyes gave Helm a legitimate excuse to look north toward the Makronotis villa. He could see a boundary wall of dark stone, the upper floor of a white-walled building and a roof of terracotta tiles. He was wondering if Makronotis had anti-aircraft guns to discourage hang-gliders when a voice behind him made his heart leap guiltily.

Helm barely remembered Plan A. Turning, he pulled back his sleeve to show his watch. "Treese para pente."

"Ah, you are English," said a beefy man with a dark and dangerous-looking Doberman on a short chain with a quick release. The dog looked decidedly unfriendly. "You think I ask the time?" added its master.

"I've no idea," Helm told him with what he hoped was a disarming smile, "but it seems to satisfy most people."

"You are on holiday?"

"Yes, taking a look at your country." Helm remembered an improvised Plan B. "I was wondering about the ferry. If it came from anywhere interesting."

"From Gavrión on Andros, a small island seventy kilometres away. Not very interesting."

"Just as well. I'm really on my way to Marathon. Does the road get any better?"

"Past Rafina. Where the ferry goes."

Helm looked at his watch again. "Five to three. Do you know how long it takes to get there? Marathon?"

"About twenty minutes."

"I'll get going, then. I'll be more than ready for a long, cold drink when I get there. Your weather's marvellous but it doesn't half give you a thirst."

"You should try the *Café Klostros* in the main square. The one with the green umbrellas. They have many European beers."

"Right, I'll do that."

Helm returned to his car, taking care not to get too close to the dog, which looked ready and willing to take a chunk out of his leg. The drive to Marathon took twenty-five minutes. An old truck with a vast load of hay seemed to be trying to collect a world-record-length queue beyond Rafina.

Helm took a sadistic delight in cutting in viciously when he managed to get past it. He watched the load sway dangerously in his mirror as the driver twitched.

He had started a trend. Helm noticed that the next over-taker also cut in on the truck. It had not crashed by the time he left it behind out of sight, but disaster seemed inevitable rather than just possible. The

Greeks, he had heard, can be as vindictive as Southern Italians. All they needed, it seemed, was an evil-minded, synthetic Irishman to show them a dirty trick.

After two bottles of the ubiquitous *Heineken* lager and a quick look round an ordinary small town with a name that was part of world history, Helm headed back toward Athens. He had realized that the man with the Doberman had appeared with disconcerting suddenness near the villa.

The Makronotis security system seemed so efficient that Helm was sure that someone would phone the café in Marathon to make sure that a tourist with a white hat and a blue cotton jacket had turned up, as promised. And then, with any luck, he would be forgotten.

Helm drove round Athens to Piraeus and returned to the city by bus. He arrived just in time to watch Phileros Makronotis return to his hotel. The black Mercedes, which had an odd-numbered plate, circled Elousis Square twice before the radiomen called it in for a ten-second parade across the pavement.

When the bus unloaded him in Piraeus, Helm called his contact again from a public telephone to ask about the videocamera. He had to wait a good two minutes to get through. His contact told him to look in the Fiat's boot, behind the spare tyre.

When he got back to his car, Helm was not to surprised to find that the spare tyre was flat and there were no batteries in the camera. A helpful assistant in a nearby shop sold him a set of working batteries and a set of spares, and two V60 tape cassettes. At the garage, the sad-looking mechanic exchanged the spare for a wheel with an inflated tyre and apologized for the error.

His failure to ask for payment told Helm that respect for Mr. Lane's power exceeded the natural impulse toward insolence of a self-employed businessman. The sad-face put on a thin smile when Helm mentioned his problem about having an odd-numbered plate on an even day.

The mechanic thought it quite funny when Helm went on to mention that he should have been issued with a set of revolving number plates with different numbers, as James Bond would have received. There was a sticker on the right side of the windscreen. Helm had ignored it because it was in Greek and he had no idea what it was about.

The mechanic told him that the sticker was supposed to tell greedy cops that the owner of the car had paid a whacking premium for the privilege of having access to Athens on any day of the week. Clearly, an enterprising cop had spotted a sucker. Helm felt even more glad that he was on expenses.

A café conveniently close to his flat provided a meal of grilled red mullet, crumbly, local bread and seductively smooth red wine, which could persuade a man with a very low haemoglobin level to go over his limit. Fortified, and only one glass over his limit, Helm made an amateur video of Valaki and the sea-traffic in the bay from the flat part of his roof.

He experimented with the zoom control and the effect of lighting conditions on the quality of the images as the evening darkened. The camera was light and simple to operate. Given the opportunity, capturing Phileros Makronotis on tape would be a point-and-press-the-button job.

A call to Mr. Lane the next morning told Helm that his target intended to spend Saturday on his yacht. Helm was in Piraeus in good time to watch the arrival of the bodyguards and then their master. The black Mercedes parked in an area of the marina that was closed to the general public. Makronotis took just twelve seconds to travel from his car, down a flight of concrete steps and into the cabin of a launch.

Helm had his videocamera in his cabin bag. With the strap at its shortest setting, the bag fitted snugly under his arm. If he cut a hole in the end for the lens, and another in the side to give more certain access to the on-off button, he could have an effective candid-camera system.

As the launch pulled away, he was glad that he had not vandalized his cabin bag. There had been no opportunity for a clear shot at the billionaire from pavement level and Helm had been inspected at least once by a young man with a hearing aid, who looked like the Greek equivalent of a US Secret Service presidential bodyguard.

Three others of the same breed were in circulation in the danger area, two men and a woman, making no attempt to hide the contrast between white wires and tanned skin. All of them looked young, vigilant and dangerous.

If they were so visible, Helm told himself, there had to be others lurking unseen in among the gangs of tourists and the locals. The job had to be a whole lot more difficult than just putting a camera in a bag and pointing it at the right time. It wouldn't be worth £25,000 plus expenses otherwise.

As he strolled around, Helm took care to keep both hands away from his cabin bag. The guards, he told himself, would check hundreds of people every day. Their eyes would pass over the crowd, stopping only if they detected what could be a threatening movement. Helm wanted to remain just another tourist wandering about on the quayside, someone with no previous history if he ever attracted attention in the future. That way lay relative safety – he hoped.

Phileros Makronotis spent Sunday at his villa. Having written off the country retreat as a dead loss, Robert Helm took a day off with a clear conscience. He was changing his clothes two, three, even four times a day in the boiling hot weather, and he had an urgent appointment with his flat's washing machine. Fortunately, getting things dried and applying the sterilizing effect of a good dose of sunlight posed no problems.

Helm was back in Elousis Square on Monday, using the same café because the waiter had written the Greek for 'sticky bun' in his phrasebook. Helm was washing his bun down with the usual *American Coffee* when his friend crash-landed at the next table. The beefy bodyguard raised a hand in greeting, showing off a collection of gold rings, then pointed to Helm's radio.

"Chinese radio!"

Helm smiled pleasantly as the big man had a good laugh, then a better cough. A waiter brought a glass of iced water and gave the bodyguard a light for his *Lucky Strike*. Helm, glancing through Saturday's *Daily Telegraph*, switched off his radio when the financial programme started. He signalled to the waiter and pointed to his coffee cup.

He refused to look up when the black Mercedes arrived at the Hotel Renga. His peripheral vision showed him a moving white object. Helm took no notice of it, raising his paper to fold it to another inside page as the silent limousine moved out into the traffic. It had the wrong registration number for an odd date but Helm assumed that it had one of the premium stickers. Or even that it was electrically powered and pollutionless if it was so quiet.

The bodyguard was still there when Helm finished his coffee. A movement caught the Greek's eye. Helm lifted a hand as a gesture of farewell, then pulled his hat down over his eyes in readiness for the shock of moving out of deep shadow into the burning, summer sunshine.

An almost familiar voice answered at lunchtime when Helm used his telephone number to inquire about Makronotis' movements for the evening. The new Mr. Lane had an English instead of a Greek accent. There was an impatient if not downright sinister note in the contact's voice.

His confidence shaken by the implied 'hurry up and get the job done' in the English voice, Helm went for a walk instead of stopping somewhere for lunch. Half an hour later, he had thought himself into a more positive frame of mind, restoring his appetite at the same time. Thrusting, dynamic John Scott was the man in charge, not out-of-his-depth Robert Helm. Scott set the pace. He was the one gambling what

could be the residue of a shortened life for £25,000. Back in London, Bateman had given Scott a whole week to do the job. Their contract called for video pictures of Phileros Makronotis. Nothing had been said about quality or how many or early delivery.

The more he replayed the telephone conversation in his mind, and worked out things that he should have said – instead of making spineless apologies – the more Helm became convinced that the new Mr. Lane was Bateman. Bateman's presence in Greece altered the equation considerably.

It raised the possibility that he could be a traitor working from within the Makronotis Organization. If so, the quality of his information would be first-class and reliable. But Helm remained in acute danger if he were to be spotted by the gangs of bodyguards. On the other hand, if Bateman was using him to run some sort of security check, Helm was unlikely to end up at the bottom of Piraeus Bay as concrete-booted mullet-food if he gave himself away.

If it was all a test, he might just be able to get away with some sort of *Kamikaze* dash from the café with his videocamera as Makronotis was crossing the pavement to his car – if nothing else came to mind. But if it wasn't a test, he was liable to end up on the pavement leaking from a dozen bullet holes. He had to guess how much caution to use.

He kept running up against the distinct possibility that John Scott was being used as part of a plot to kill Phileros Makronotis. Helm found that he could justify a decision to carry on by concluding that anyone with as much money as Makronotis had enjoyed his life thus far.

If he did die, it would be his own fault for failing to spend enough of his billions on security. Anything can be justified by someone with a strong enough motive, Helm told himself. Conventional morality no longer applied to someone who believed that he might be doomed.

Helm spent the afternoon on the Hill of Ares, looking at the ruins and thinking about his assignment. He refused to believe that even a trained professional could have achieved more than himself in three days.

The only qualification offered to Bateman, alias the new Mr. Lane, had been a medical condition and the possibility that it would kill the special agent in the near future. Imminent death is supposed to sharpen the perceptions, Helm knew, but in practice, he found that it offers no guarantees of increased intelligence or ingenuity.

While he was doing his thinking, he wondered about his doctor's reaction to a message delivered via the receptionist on the morning of his departure for Greece. There was either a sentence of death or a message of hope in Robert Helm's file at the health centre. This was the first time that he had thought about the test results since stepping off the airliner in Athens airport.

No doubt Dr. Bennett was baffled by his patient's cavalier attitude to his fate – swanning off abroad on a business trip instead of waiting for the most important news of his life. The simple truth of the matter was that Helm didn't feel particularly ill at that moment and he had no intention of worrying about the state of his health until some real symptoms became apparent. At any rate, something more incapacitating than his abnormally low haemoglobin level.

At the same time, he knew that cancers are cells out of control. They can double in size in weeks or less, and if a surgeon tries to cut them out, rogue cells can leap into the bloodstream to invade less accessible parts of the body. He knew that fast action can lead to successful treatment. Lingering pessimism warned him that things can still go dreadfully wrong for the unlucky few. He had no reason to believe that Robert Helm was specially privileged in the luck department.

The germ of an idea began to form as he forced his thoughts from possible futures to the hard fact of earning his £25,000. Another trip to Elousis Square on Tuesday morning put him back to square one. The corners of the square lay at the cardinal points of the compass. A main road formed the north-to-east side. Makronotis' hotel faced that road, on the south-to-west side and about a third of the way along from the southern corner of the square.

Helm's brilliant idea had been to make his video from an upper-floor window on the south-to-east side of the square. It foundered on the rock of practicality. The office buildings had receptionists in the lobby, uniformed security men on the prowl and no *To Let* signs for someone wanting to hire an office for a month or so.

There were doors to be seen in the shops and restaurants but Helm lacked the cheek to blunder through one of them in search of a staircase to an upper floor. He also lacked sufficient Greek to try to talk his way past a suspicious receptionist in an office building. If he had to try it, it was strictly a one-shot plan.

If the security men threw him out, or even politely escorted a confused foreigner to the door, they would turn him over to the police if he tried the same trick in another building. Helm was sure that the Makronotis security network picked up all such disturbances in the square's routine.

He spent three hours at the café in the centre of Elousis Square, wrestling with his problem and the main crossword in Saturday's *Telegraph*. He preferred to remain outdoors in the shade of an umbrella instead of taking refuge in one of the air-conditioned buildings. He had found that there was a time-lag before his body realized that it no longer needed to sweat.

Unevaporated sweat made his clothes cling uncomfortably, leaving

him feeling soggy and crumpled. It was much better to stay outside on a day when there was a bit of a breeze to punch holes in the smog-ceiling, hide behind his sunglasses and drink plenty of *American Coffee*, soft drinks or bottles of *Heineken* to replace lost fluids.

He had found that sunglasses are a necessity for a blue-eyed Nordic type, not a vanity. Dazzling reflections sparkled from every light surface, including his cheeks. He understood now why American footballers paint black strips under their eyes – not just to look fierce but to cut down on glare.

The light was so bright that he could capture a detailed after-image by opening and closing his eyes quickly. He could freeze-frame passers-by on one leg and in all the other weird postures of walking. If he closed his eyes then flicked them open, performing a series of reverse-blinks, he could reduce the city's charging, mainly even-numbered traffic to a succession of stills, like a film played at ultra-slow-speed. He was amusing himself with this secret diversion after a leisurely lunch when his brilliant idea burst upon him.

This, he knew, was one that had to work. He was back in business.

2. DEAD MAN WALKING

HELM ENJOYED BEING mysterious when he telephoned the English Mr. Lane. Explanations were not in his contract. Why he happened to want a radio-controlled model aircraft was none of Lane's business. Helm collected a large parcel at the garage in Piraeus two and a half hours later, which said a lot for his back-up's efficiency. He had bought a hand-drill, some bits for it and a packet of nuts and bolts at a do-it-yourself shop in the suburbs of Athens. Pointing at things and a little Greek had proved an effective way of shopping.

He spent the rest of the afternoon getting his idea to work. Helm was mechanically handy and good at figuring out how things function. He had learned that a five-minute job usually takes half an hour to do properly, but he could afford to take his time now.

He had two full days of his week left and he saw no reason why he shouldn't demand more time if he needed it. If the job really was as important as Bateman made out, then all of the conditions had to be negotiable.

In fact, Helm was able to tape a full set of Makronotis' comings and goings at the Hotel Renga the next day. When he rang his contact number in the evening, however, Bateman/Lane told him to call back in two days' time, on Friday.

Helm added Thursday's trips across the pavement, to and from the Mercedes, for good measure, giving his client over a minute of live action. He returned his equipment to the garage in Piraeus and posted his experimental videorecording of Valaki and surroundings to his home as a souvenir.

Bateman arranged a lunchtime meeting when Helm called the contact number on Friday morning. Helm spent over an hour enjoying a good lunch at a restaurant on Eolou Street with the second videocassette in his pocket. Bateman failed to show up.

Helm took a ferry over to Salamis on Saturday morning. There was no sign of Bateman on the boat going or coming back, or at the

rendezvous specified in the island's main town. Helm spent another hour wandering around part of Zappion Park on Sunday.

On Monday, he sealed the cassette in two plastic bags, one inside the other, using a lot of parcel tape. He buried the package under a distinctive rock beside the road into Athens. He offered to tell the elusive Mr. Lane where he had put it in his next call to the contact number. Bateman wanted to receive the information in person, not over the telephone.

Feeling fed up and put upon, Helm told him that he was flying back to England on Tuesday morning. If Mr. Lane didn't fancy a round trip of three thousand miles to collect the information, then he had better show up at that afternoon's rendezvous.

Helm cut short Bateman's ramblings about how he wanted to be absolutely sure that no one followed him to the meeting or listened in on their phone conversation. Helm took advantage of a pause for breath to order Bateman to tell him about it at the café, where they were supposed to meet. Then he rang off – which, he told himself, was his privilege if he was paying for the call.

He had had enough of Greece for the moment. The job was over. He wanted to go home, where he could speak and read the language and he didn't have to remind himself to use bottled water when he brushed his teeth in case the liquid poison that came out of the taps gave him an even more terminal condition.

He had a tan of sorts, which made him look less vampire-drained, even if his lips were still pale and bluish, and a whole lot of money to spend. The problem of how to get the job done had been churning around in his mind from waking to sleeping for seven days, leaving him little time to think about anything else. Once he had cracked his problem, he had had nothing better to do for the next five days than think of ways to spend his fee.

Helm took the battered blue Fiat into Athens for the last time – he hoped. He was becoming expert on eating out in the city. There were franchised hamburger and pizza joints looking very much like the ones at home, but the adventurous tourist who liked olive oil, lemon juice and wild oregano had many delights to explore.

The bread was available of all shapes and sizes, with and without sesame seeds. Fish and lamb kebabs, delicious red mullet and exotic swordfish steaks all vied for his attention. Helm had resisted the temptations of octopus, but he had tried many sticky-sweet puddings, drowned in tooth-rotting sugar syrup, which were served with a glass of ice-cold water to unclog the throat after consumption.

Helm parked the car nearby and walked to the café chosen by Mr. Lane as the rendezvous point. He found it without too much trouble

and made himself comfortable on a shaded seat in the garden section. He soon found that he had a view of a very attractive Chinese woman at the next table. She was in her mid-twenties.

Her features were more European than flat and Oriental. She had a slim but obviously feminine figure. Her hair was short, glossy and jet black. Her outfit was a T-shirt, jeans and blue canvas beach shoes. A dark blue Mao jacket was draped along an olive-green tackle bag.

His neighbour would not have looked out of place in Shanghai, Saigon, Singapore or San Francisco. Or parts of London, Manchester or Liverpool, even. Helm decided that she might be able to pass for Greek when she wore her dark sunglasses. He had a very good look at her while struggling with the menu and his phrasebook, half hoping that she would join him to offer him the benefit of an expert command of Greek. At the same time, he knew that Bateman would turn up just when he was on the point of cracking it with the tempting stranger.

Suddenly, they were together. Helm found himself sprawled across the Chinese woman, hoping that the warm fluid soaking his trouser leg was someone's *American Coffee*. He could still feel the hot, violent breath and the sonic impact of an explosion.

Glass, furniture and human debris were still falling. Helm struggled to his feet, ears ringing, lumps of glass falling off his back. He pulled the Chinese woman to her feet. The top of her head came up to his chin, which made her about five feet three. Thinking about her took his mind off the horrors around him.

The pair of them staggered away from screams and curses in many languages, deafened, clinging together for mutual support. A policeman deflected them into the back of a police car. Siren blaring, the police car carved a path through the traffic to guide an ambulance to a hospital.

Helm and the Chinese woman followed three stretcher cases into a casualty department. A nurse with a pair of scissors homed in on his blood-spattered trousers. Helm managed to get them off in the nick of time. Most of the blood was on the outside and all of that belonged to others. He was irrationally glad to be wearing underpants fresh on that day from a *Marks & Sparks* pack in celebration of his imminent departure.

The Chinese woman translated when a doctor told Helm that his injuries were superficial. Her English was very basic. Helm got the impression that her Greek was much the same. It was she who cleaned him up and applied dressings to his back and the backs of his legs, allowing the hospital staff to concentrate on the badly injured patients. Miraculously, the Chinese woman was completely untouched, having been sitting in the explosion-shadow of a human shield called Robert Helm.

Helm wrote out a joint statement in English for a plain-clothes policeman. They could say little more than that the explosion had been behind Helm and that they had not seen who had planted the bomb. Helm added John Scott's name and his address in Valaki.

The Chinese woman borrowed his ballpoint to add her details, then she handed the sheet of lined notepaper to the bulky detective, who had the sick expression of someone who has seen enough blood and gore and guts to last a lifetime and more.

Helm learned, from a spot of fast reading, that his companion was called Tsai Yuan-lin and that she was staying at the hotel where Phileros Makronotis lived, which impressed the detective no end. He missed the room number.

Tsai helped him to find his car. She had retained her tackle bag and Mao jacket through all the excitement. Helm drove out of Athens with the sun visors down, taking more than his usual care. Greek motorists and animals, especially donkeys, seemed to have an irresistible urge to hurl themselves into the path of on-coming visitors. The last thing that Helm wanted, in his severely shaken condition, was to have to deal with the owner of a suicidal donkey or a xenophobic cop.

Valaki, a small town on a promontory at the southern end of Piraeus Bay, lies four miles from Athens city centre in a straight line, but a good six miles by road. The city's airport, three and a half miles further on, was the reason why Helm had been able to rent his first-floor flat so cheaply – it lay directly under the flight path.

His front door opened into a large studio with a kitchen alcove containing a gas cooker, a small fridge and a washing machine of similar size. Two doors at the other end of the studio led to a tiled bathroom with a shower and a bedroom with a double bed. A previous tenant had left several nondescript seascapes hanging on the picture rails around the studio.

Helm had painted over them with white undercoat, and found time to dash off several masterpieces of the Mondrian School – black grids with areas filled with oblongs of primary colours – to establish credentials as a visitor with artistic leanings.

Helm realized that he had been adopted when Tsai tested the hammock in the studio, then hung her tackle bag on an adjacent hook. He was feeling too bruised and shell-shocked to ask why she had not gone back to her hotel.

There was a sort of sense in two survivors of an assault by a Greek wing of the IRA sticking together because they had lived through a shattering experience together. Helm felt saturated with images of broken bodies and wreckage. He had come to terms with running away from one possible death sentence, only to run slap bang into another.

Helm had not believed in Oriental Stoicism since a showing of *Seven Samurai* on Channel Four had put wall-to-wall blubbing Japs on his television. Tsai's hands shook as much as his own as she matched him drink for drink through a third of a bottle of *Metaxas* brandy.

Later, they had a meal of reheated meatballs and pasta, washed down with extremely palatable *Bacchus* red wine. They took their coffee and more brandy up to the flat area of the roof behind the raised wedge of the skylight.

Helm's radio was tuned to the BBC World Service. He switched on and waited for the news. Information had to travel to him via London before it became comprehensible. He had made the acquaintance of most of the Greek alphabet in maths and physics classes at school.

He could spell out street names and signs with difficulty, remembering that 'H' is a Greek 'E', not a Russian 'N', and the Greeks, like the French, shove in a lot more letters than those that they pronounce. He knew numbers and how to tell the time. The rest of his vocabulary was travel- and restaurant-Greek and sufficient only for the business in hand. Routine small talk with casual acquaintances was out of the question.

Nothing of any importance had happened elsewhere in the world on that final Monday in August. A bomb in a café in Athens was a godsend to the news services. Two French women, mother and daughter, had lost their legs below the knees, which explained where most of the blood had come from.

Helm knew from personal experience that human body can lose large quantities of its vital ingredients without suffering too apparent ill effects. The hospital expected the women to survive to endure the phantom pains of amputation and the inconvenience of artificial limbs. It was one hell of a fine way to end a holiday.

Helm wondered what he would put on a renewed passport if he had been sitting next to a shopping-bag bomb. Would he be able to leave his height at six feet one? Or would he have to knock off about eighteen inches? Arab terrorists were thought to have planted the bomb.

Equal favourites were the Abu Nidal faction of the PLO, seeking to splash blood on the international reputation of Yasser Arafat's official faction, and the Lebanese *Hesbollah*. If the so-called 'Party Of God' went around blowing the legs off tourists in foreign countries, Helm felt proud to be an atheist.

Going into Athens had been a mistake. His fee had been paid in advance – to Helm's amazement – and he had completed the job. All that he wanted to do was make the delivery and get on with spending his earnings. There was no reason to meet Bateman/Lane face to face. A simple call between two public telephones would do the job. The

bomb had ended all obligations. Robert Helm was off home in the morning, and if Mr. Lane wanted his videocassette, he would bloody well have to come to Mr. Scott.

The early afternoon temperature had been in the low thirties Centigrade or the low nineties in familiar Fahrenheit. Helm felt that he had adapted well to the fierce heat of Greece at the end of August, but he was grateful for the cooling breeze from the bay in the evening.

At first, he had ended the day on his roof, studying maps and making plans. After his brilliant idea had come along and he had earned his £25,000, he had dropped into the habit of giving his attention to a thick paperback book. He could have bought himself a portable television set, but the TV fare was a dead loss for a non-Greek-speaker if he didn't really care for American imports – either dubbed or with sub-titles in Greek. While he read, Tsai seemed happy enough with the view out over the bay and a French station on the radio.

As long as Helm sat still in his canvas chair, his bruises and the cuts on his back remained dormant. He was high enough on the promontory to see the whole of Salamis down to the island's rocky coastline when there was no fog. He could watch ferries heading south for Piraeus, to Crete, to the islands in the east and on the other side of the Peloponnesian Peninsula, and west to a four-mile journey through the Corinth Canal. He would also watch fishing boats and pleasure craft ranging from sailing dinghies to luxury yachts as an alternative to reading.

Tsai seemed fascinated by the view – until Helm noticed that her head had slipped sideways and her breathing had slowed to the rhythm of sleep. Greek evenings could be very soporific when there was nothing to do and drunken tourists, the locals and airliners passing overhead weren't kicking up a din.

Helm dropped bottled-water ice into a glass of mineral water. He was not sure how lethal the stuff that came out of the taps was, but it would be terribly ironic if he caught something serious from it. Eating only well-cooked food and drinking only liquids from bottles had become automatic.

The evening darkened rapidly. The town of Valaki made little effort to resist the approaching night. When he looked over his shoulder, Helm could see splashes of yellowish light at the windows of houses further down the coast road. The street lights were all out. There was something wrong with the public electricity supply for the second time of a week.

Helm became aware of a faint throb of private generators. It was a signal to wrap the thermal space-blanket around the small fridge and hope that it remained cold inside until the power came on again. Candles and oil lamps were always close at hand in Valaki.

Tsai woke as Helm was heaving himself to his feet, feeling stiff, sore and sorry for himself.

"I'm going to bed," he said with a yawn. "Don't open the fridge while the power's off."

"Greek power no good," Tsai agreed with a matching yawn. "I sleep too." She conveyed the impression that she had reduced the English language to an essential minimum deliberately, that any missing verbs and articles had been discarded by her choice.

Helm rather fancied his Chinese companion but he had been a little worried in case she thought that he expected her to go to bed with him. The day had taken rather too much out of someone with tired blood. He was relieved to see that she was just as ready to sleep, but also disappointed at the way life had treated them.

He felt moderately plastered as he weaved his way to bed after wrapping the fridge in its silvery blanket, taking care to leave the radiator system exposed for when the power came on. One advantage of severe anaemia, he had found, is that it makes getting drunk a whole lot cheaper.

Helm had no intention of going all the way into oblivion, but he could get a good buzz from a couple of drinks now. They had the same effect as four or five quick pints on his normal self. He had drunk much more than that since arriving at the flat but shock and the after-effects of the explosion had created a buffer zone between himself and alcohol.

As he slumped onto his bed, lying face down to favour his cuts and bruises, he found himself unable to stop thinking about the bomb. He had more or less come to terms with the possibility of his own body killing him – or of being done in by the job. He had never considered alternative threats such as a terrorist bomb. With his sort of luck, he told himself, he would be fortunate to get home without being wiped out in a plane crash!

Robert Helm had sunk into a comfortable rut through his twenties. He lived half a mile from Maidstone and he worked in a town-centre office. He shuffled papers to help UK clients sell to clients abroad. Lancer & Stowe, plc, made its profits out of threading a path through minefields of regulations and past the bureaucratic delays created to shield inefficient or illegally protected home markets from predatory foreigners in the UK. His firm did battle regularly with other members of the proclaimed single market in Common Europe.

Helm was single, presentable and he had no grossly disgusting bad habits. He would own his Vauxhall *Cavalier* in time to trade it in for a new model, and he would own his mid-range, semi-detached house by

fifty. He had expected to marry eventually, but he was in no hurry. His business life had taught him to think in terms of long campaigns rather than impulses.

His team at Lancer & Stowe were all about thirty. Ben and Carol were a couple of long standing but they showed no signs of making it official as a prelude to having children. Jeanette's husband seemed to spend half of his working life on airliners, flying to various parts of Europe and auditioning hotels for the long weekends that they preferred to longer holidays.

A constant disappointment to Helm was the lack of jet-setting in his life. Depending on inflation, he expected to earn one to two million pounds during his working life. Most of it would disappear on routine expenses. The only time when he would lay his hands on a substantial amount of cash would be when he received his retirement lump sum. Unfortunately, he knew that he would be too old for serious jet-setting by then.

He had considered saving several thousand pounds and then blowing the lot in a fortnight of insanity. A broad streak of conservatism prevented him from unloading a huge chunk of his own money and ending up with nothing tangible to show for it. He knew that his fiscal timidity wouldn't apply to someone else's cash – but, equally unfortunately, he knew no one daft enough to shower him with jet-setting capital.

Three weeks short of his thirty-third birthday, his dull but safe future began to become anything but certain. His workmate Carol was a woman with a social conscience, which she used as a weapon to bludgeon the other three occupants of the open-plan office. She talked the group into going to a lunchtime blood-donor session on the day in question. Helm failed the initial screening test. His blood floated in both the green and the blue liquid instead of sinking like a stone.

While the others scoffed and gushed gore into plastic transfusion packs, Helm had to suffer the indignity of allowing a doctor to stick a hypodermic syringe into his arm to take a small sample for a haemoglobin check. The doctor mentioned that the screening test set a high level for the iron content of his blood. Failing the test probably meant only that giving a litre of blood would make him a little anaemic.

Ten days later Helm received a letter from the blood transfusion service. It asked, ominously, for the name and address of his doctor. Helm had been registered with someone at the local health centre for years but he had never met the doctor in question. His last medical consultation had been with an earlier doctor, from whom the present one had inherited him. Helm had been suffering from some childhood ailment and he had gone to the doctor's home in the bad old days, long

before the health centre had been built.

Helm knew where his former doctor had lived – he passed the house most days and it had reverted to a full-time private dwelling - but he had no idea where to find the health centre. He had to look in his files for a circular giving the name of his current doctor and the address of the health centre. Then, out of idle curiosity, he had a look at a street map to find out where the health centre had been built as he had never come across that street name before.

Another cheerful letter arrived from the blood transfusion service a week later to advise him to discuss his anaemia with his doctor. The transfusion service had passed on the results of his test to the doctor, but Helm still had no idea what they were. Helm showed his letters to Edward Stowe, the firm's junior partner and his immediate superior, when he asked for permission to come in late the following Monday morning.

Stowe warned him that the doctor would prescribe iron tablets, which would make him horribly constipated. Stowe knew that because his wife had received the same treatment. Helm resolved, as he had done many times in the past, that he was going to deliver a firm 'No!' the next time Carol sprang one of her ideas on him.

Dr. Bennett's receptionist knew the regulars by sight. Robert Helm had to give his name when he turned up for his appointment. The doctor turned out to be a man in his middle forties. He was nearly as tall as the patient, who topped six feet, and he had a firm handshake. His lop-sided grin made him look a little tipsy and less intimidating. His news gave Helm a severe shock. His haemoglobin level was a good forty per cent below normal.

Helm answered questions mechanically and submitted to some routine poking and prodding. He refused to believe that he could be seriously ill without feeling symptoms of some sort, such as tiredness or shortness of breath. The doctor remarked on his pallor. Helm thought that he had the natural complexion of an indoor man.

He had his sleeve rolled up still after the check on his blood pressure. He felt rather uneasy about supplying another sample of blood but he found that he could watch without queasiness as the needle entered a major vein at the inside of his elbow. Dark blood filled a large syringe, making him even more anaemic. Dr. Bennet explained that the blood tests were carried out in steps. He needed to know the results from the first series before he knew whether he needed to go on for the next set of tests.

Helm left the surgery with two birthday presents from the NHS – a small bottle for a urine sample and a letter to the hospital in town asking them to X-ray his chest. He had the X-ray on the way to work.

The nurse at the reception desk gave him a beaming smile. Helm felt guilty afterwards about not returning it, but he wasn't really feeling like smiling. All that he could think about was how he had failed to notice his haemoglobin level dropping to below that of an average victim of a chainsaw accident.

His workmates wanted to know if he was well enough to go the pub for a birthday lunch. Helm could tell them only that he felt all right. Nothing specific would be known about his condition until the test results arrived – and perhaps not even then. Dr. Bennett had told him not to worry, which he had not been doing anyway. Edward Stowe was surprised to hear that Helm had not been prescribed a bottle of iron tablets. Helm was grateful to be spared the constipation.

Keeping his mind on his work was difficult through the afternoon. He kept thinking about his astonishingly low haemoglobin level. Dr. Bennett had asked if he had felt tired recently in view of his seriously impaired oxygen-transport capability. Helm realized that he had been taking things fairly easily for the last few months and not really testing himself.

His work was mental rather than physical – it had not been affected. He had drifted out of an eighteen-month relationship with a teacher called Susan when he had taken a separate summer holiday the previous June. She had wanted more commitment. He had been reluctant to take the step of living together. He had yet to meet someone to take her place.

His holiday money had gone on replacing several rotting windows. The necessary campaign of patching and decorating, and some exterior painting to get the house into shape to survive another winter, had devoured his free time through July. His social life had been reduced to very occasional trips to the pub.

The decorating work had not been particularly strenuous, but he had to admit that mowing his few square yards of lawn could leave him feeling quite worn out, and he had experienced trouble with forcing himself out of bed some mornings – but he had never, ever been good at getting up in the morning. What he was stuck with, he decided, was the problem of sorting genuine symptoms from reflex hypochondria.

In the evening, his parents telephoned birthday greetings from their latest home in Carlisle. Helm kept quiet about his trip to the doctor to spare them unnecessary worry in the event of a false alarm. He was still feeling relatively immortal, despite his reflex pessimism, and the physical distance between himself and his parents, and not talking face-to-face, helped to keep his tone casual and the secret preserved.

The Helm family was drifting apart on three winds. They had started moving apart from the middle of England. His parents were still heading

toward Scotland. Robert had bounced at the Isle of Wight. He was heading north now. He had expected to meet his parents bouncing back from John O' Groats at about Glasgow in the next century. Stephanie, his younger sister, was going west: New York, San Francisco, and now Yokohama. Robert expected Steph to crash in from the east for the great Helm family reunion cum collision. With any luck, his haemoglobin problem would be buried deep in the dustbin of memory by then.

Helm left work early a week later. It was *Result Day*. Dr. Bennett was very reassuring in a terrifying sort of way. He was still waiting for the blood test results but the urine sample had been normal. Then he switched on a viewing screen to show Helm a fuzzy, white blob on his X-ray. It would be a good idea, the doctor told him, if someone had 'a little look inside' with a fibre-optic probe and whipped out a sample of the blob for laboratory analysis. Dr. Bennett was quite cheery. He still thought that there was no cause for alarm.

It was all very well for him, Helm thought as he began the five-minute walk home from the health centre. He didn't have blobs in his lungs, nobody proposed messing about inside him and he didn't have a haemoglobin level that suggested that Count Dracula had given him a good seeing-to.

Helm realized that he should have replied with a firm 'No!' when asked if he would like to see a specialist. 'Like' was entirely the wrong word. After all, nobody wants his condition to be serious enough to merit a specialist's time. Robert Helm wanted his problems to go away as mysteriously as they had developed. Thirty-three was too young for his body to start dropping to pieces or wearing out.

His concentration went to pieces. At work the next day, he found himself reading documents three and four times, and still failing to grasp their content. Ever alert for ripples in the smooth flow of work, Edward Stowe called him in to his office on Wednesday morning. Helm had resisted the urge to shock Ben, Carol and Jeanette with the prospect of his exchanging a desk for a wooden overcoat. He admitted to Edward Stowe that there might be a tiny chance that he would not need one of the firm's calendars for the next year. His accompanying silly grin was one of macabre pleasure behind the relief of telling someone.

His work was suffering, he explained, because he had no idea if he was healthy-ish, curable after a short or long period of treatment, or plain doomed. A white blob on an X-ray suggested lung cancer immediately. Helm was a non-smoker but he had been a passive smoker for all of his drinking and working life – if significant damage could be done by the age of thirty-three.

Edward Stowe reacted with the false jollity of someone with a bubonic plague carrier in his office. Helm could see tombstones in his boss's eyes. Stowe was in his late forties, over a stone overweight and he smoked small cigars and did his fair share of business entertaining. Robert Helm provided an awful warning of what could happen to him if he carried on as he was.

The outcome of the meeting was a month's sick leave, with immediate effect, which Helm could cut short if he received good news. He composed the advertisement as soon as he got home. It was a diversion, an insurance against bad news. It was an absurd over-reaction, totally irrational, born of panic, frustration, desperation and ignorance of how bad things really were – but he was hardly 100% okay, not if he was walking around with less haemoglobin inside him than most people who receive a blood transfusion.

If anyone replied to the advertisement, Helm told himself, he would have an even chance of doing some jet-setting for a short time. The ad was a mad gesture by a methodical man. To his surprise, the newspapers accepted it as just another routine insertion in their personal columns. One of the ads read:

MAN WITH terminal condition,
not incapacitated as yet, seeks
hazardous work for highest pay.
Apply BOX 315.

When it appeared in print, Helm decided that his advertisement was as truthful as any of the others. Everyone has at least one terminal condition. Pointless mysticism aside, all life has the same conclusion. Helm's problem was not knowing whether his body was trying to assassinate him before he had received what he considered to be a fair ration of life. What he had achieved with the advertisement, possibly, was to recapture the initiative.

When he had skimmed through the rest of the pages in the newspapers that had received his custom, he went back to moping around the house, cleaning without enthusiasm and wondering what the specialist would find inside him in five days' time and how much a solicitor charges to draw up a will.

Eventually, he got round to wondering what sort of jobs people would offer him and where to draw the line of acceptability. What if he was asked to kill someone, for instance? The immediate answer to that was, 'Why not, if he could get away with it?' Nobody has an automatic right to life. Several thousand people find that out every year on Britain's roads.

Helm started off his mental debate not sure whether he was capable of killing. He soon realized that world wars are possible only because governments can put a gun into just about anybody's hand and turn that person into a killer. Then he realized that he was back to worrying about things before he had the information to assess their relevance.

He was still surprised when someone sent a London telephone number to Box 315. It reached Helm after a joyless weekend, during which he had finished off the painting, which had to be done whether or not he would be around to gain any benefit from his labours. He spent an hour asking himself if the number came from a genuine client or a joker. Then he made the call.

A man with an ordinary, non-jokerish voice answered. He wanted a meeting at the Tower of London the next morning, Tuesday. Helm explained that he had a hospital appointment that day – a fortunate coincidence, which highlighted his terminal condition. A meeting on Wednesday morning was equally acceptable.

Helm had his nerves almost under control when he reported to the hospital on Tuesday morning. The exploratory procedure was carried out under local anaesthetic. He lay on his right side with his left arm behind his back, out of the way, and allowed the consultant and a nurse to mess about with the numb portion of his chest. He watched a colour television monitor as the fibre-optic probe explored what looked like viscous, pink froth. He felt quite dismayed when jaws reached out of the probe to bite a piece from a waxy lump, which looked as big as a boulder.

He had seen the enemy and he had not enjoyed the experience.

Then the consultant decided that the lump was so readily accessible that she might as well whip the lot out. Without further ado, she enlarged the pilot hole to a slot and dived inside to do battle. Helm averted his gaze from the monitor. The surgeon was a rather thin, Asian woman in her forties. She radiated an intimidating competence and she spoke with an upper-class drawl. Helm felt sure that every one of his nervous remarks to her had sounded pathetic and that she considered him an inarticulate moron with no sense of humour.

He realized later that he was doing her an injustice. He had failed to laugh at her jokes because he had not realized that humour is possible in an operating room. Someone of her seniority would know that patients aren't at their best in strange and stressful surroundings, and she would never form unreasonable assumptions based on faulty information.

His side was a little sore when the anaesthetic wore off. Most of the pain had gone by the following morning, when he drove into London, where he met Bateman, who gave him lots of money and sent him to

Athens, where he completed an impossible assignment before getting blown up in a café.

Helm had been planning to check with the airlines for a flight home after he had told Bateman where to look for the videocassette. All that he had done since the explosion had been to bleed a little, which was not a very good idea for someone in his condition, wash blood off his jeans and get quite drunk with a complete stranger called Tsai.

Letting a strange woman stay the night was something that cautious Robert Helm would never do. Sleeping in separate rooms proved that John Scott was a little outrageous, but not much more liberated.

Another Tuesday's dawn arrived just before Helm woke up. The curtains on his right had blown open slightly at the top. There was a bright spot of sunlight high on the wall opposite when he opened his eyes. He became aware of noises – someone was moving around in the studio. He thought about burglars. Then he remembered Tsai.

As if on cue, the bedroom door opened and she sneaked in. Helm began to think again of romantic encounters in a foreign country. The awful warnings of the AIDS Age didn't apply to a man with a more lethal condition – if he had one. His speculations scattered when he saw what Tsai was holding in her small hand. It was made of dark metal. It had what looked like a nine-millimetre hole in the end.

Suddenly, the terminal condition was no joke any more.

3. DONKEY DROP

TSAI LOOKED BEHIND the door. Her head turned toward the bed. When she saw that Helm was looking at her, she seemed to grow several inches. She had been sneaking around in a crouch. The intimidating black mouth of the self-loading pistol pointed steadily at his head. Helm lay perfectly still.

“Stay,” said Tsai.

Helm stayed. He wasn’t sure whether to be insulted by what sounded like a command to a dog. It had to be just part of Tsai’s limited but effective English vocabulary. She searched his clothes very quickly – not looking in the pockets, just squeezing them to see if they contained a large object.

“Out. Open curtains.”

Helm got out of the bed, slowly and carefully, and drew the curtains, glad that he had brought a pair of pyjama trousers. Tsai crossed to the bed. Flicks of the pistol guided Helm away from the window and into a corner. Tsai tapped the top of her head with her left hand. Helm interlaced his fingers and put his hands on top of his head.

To his surprise, he was feeling quite calm and in control of himself. It had to be something to do, he decided, with the knowledge that being shot might deprive him of only a few months of life rather than forty years. A few months was no great loss and nothing to worry about.

Tsai stripped sheets and an under-blanket from the bed. She groped the single pillow, then examined the mattress, looking for large lumps and signs that the stitching had been cut and restored. Helm knew that she had searched the rest of the flat by then.

“Not here?” she said at last.

“Obviously not,” said Helm, wondering whether to try to jump her. He had read that the impulse to self-destruction can be irresistible at times. His problem was figuring out whether the path to self-destruction lay in taking action or in doing nothing.

“Dress. We have breakfast,” Tsai said eventually.

Helm felt too intimidated by the gun to be embarrassed about changing from pyjama trousers to street clothes in front of a strange woman. He felt wide awake, even though getting up at dawn was a never-in-a-million-years concept for him. In fact, he was finding getting to sleep increasingly difficult.

It took at least an hour for him to drop off most nights, and some nights were a cycle of short naps and long periods awake. Only memories of dreams told him that he had snatched any sleep. Getting up before eight o'clock, or nine-thirty at weekends, had become a major problem. He knew now that a gun could get him out of bed at ten past six with no bother at all!

Helm brewed coffee, toasted some bread and spread it with butter and honey. He and Tsai sat at opposite sides of the studio. Helm had slipped into a state of numbed compliance. This was the flip side of the £25,000. A job worth so much money for so little effort had to be dangerous.

He had allowed for a beating-up but not for a bullet. He had decided against trying to take away Tsai's gun, as that plan would give him the best chance of surviving to spend his twenty-five grand. He had no idea how trigger-happy she was, or how much firearms training she had received, but she had a certain air of confidence, as if she were following a thought-out plan.

After they had finished the meal, Helm washed up and Tsai sat watching him.

"Aren't you going to tell me who you are and what you want?" he asked when he had stacked the dishes neatly on the drainer.

"We go see someone now," said Tsai. "Be careful, please."

Helm assumed that the answer to both questions was *no*. He drew some comfort from the *please*. He guessed that Tsai's room at the Hotel Renga lay on the third floor, and that her employer's name began with *M*.

Tsai draped her blue Mao jacket across her right forearm to hide the pistol. Two or three of the locals were out and about at six-thirty. They waved a greeting to the English artist. Helm waved back between unlocking both front doors of the Fiat.

He was unable to decide whether Tsai would dare to shoot him if he ran for it instead of getting into the car – but he had nowhere to run to, and no one would dare to help him while Tsai was waving a gun around. Taking the easy course, Helm started the engine. He turned automatically onto the Athens road at the edge of Valaki.

Tsai kept the pistol aimed across her body. She had no need to watch the prisoner. At that range, she had only to pull the trigger to cause serious if not immediately fatal damage. The country road went its own

sweet way to the east at first, twisting round several low hills. It met the main road north to Athens about two and a half miles from the city.

Helm drove without haste, keeping a wary eye open for crazy motorists and suicidal donkeys. He knew now that his meeting with Tsai had been arranged. The identity of the person who had brought them together at the exploding café remained a mystery, however. Bateman had been making such a song and dance about the risk of being bugged that Helm had refused to believe that anyone had penetrated Bateman's precautions. Now, he was having doubts.

When he dialled his contact number, Helm always heard five sets of rings then a series of soft beeps. He had been told to wait as long as necessary for an answer. He assumed that he reached some sort of relay device first, which connected him with Mr. Lane's portable telephone.

Two of the calls had been answered promptly – one with a car engine, the other with loud seagulls in the background. There had been a delay of up to five minutes on the other calls, presumably when Mr. Lane had been forced to sneak away from company.

Helm assumed that Bateman/Lane had told a third party about the meeting at the café. This third party had ratted to the Makronotis organization, either deliberately or inadvertently. If Tsai had any information on that subject, she was keeping it to herself.

Even though Tsai was pointing a gun at him, Helm still considered her an ally. Being blown up together had created a bond – from his point of view, at least. He could pretend that the gun was empty, that he was being bluffed successfully. Tsai was just doing a job, even if she was doing it as efficiently as someone who really had it in for Robert Helm.

He wondered about negotiating with Tsai. A flash of movement atop a roadside rocky wall caught his eye. A brownish-grey lump with spindly legs flew at him. In an irrational split second, Helm wondered why someone was throwing a dead donkey at him. Then it was under his wheels.

The steering wheel spun in his hands. Tsai's gun went off, shattering the window beside him. Helm's foot jumped off the brake as he tried to throw himself backwards in his seat. The Fiat bounced off the road to roll down a shallow hill. Helm found himself lying on top of Tsai for the second time in two days. Water sloshed into the car.

A fist wrapped in cloth demolished the crazed windscreen, showering Helm and Tsai with chips of glass. A man and a woman looked in. Helm saw ancient, tanned faces and open mouths with gapped teeth. The question about the donkey had been answered. The locals were bandits, who used their expired livestock to make tourists crash so that they could be robbed.

Younger voices moved the ancient assassins away from the wind-screen space. Tsai opened her eyes for a moment. She gave Helm a reassuring smile then closed her eyes again. She seemed to be playing dead.

"Hey, are you okay?" The voice spoke English with a Greek-American accent. Its owner was a man in his twenties with a blue-striped, designer sweatshirt.

"I'm thinking it over," said Helm.

"Let's get you out." The young man attacked the rubber seal of the windscreen with a flick-knife then removed the rest of the shattered glass.

Helm managed to wriggle out without treading too heavily on Tsai.

"What about the girl?"

"She looks in a bad way." Helm fumbled for a handkerchief and held it to his nose, which had been bleeding freely, which was a hell of a thing to happen to someone who was severely anaemic.

The young man looked into the car, then turned away holding his mouth. He staggered a few yards before vomiting vigorously. The power of suggestion made Helm feel some sympathetic queasiness but he managed to control himself. If he did puke, he vowed, he would do so profusely and in the ambushers' car.

Helm's Fiat had rolled into a stream. The sun-warmed water had soaked Tsai's T-shirt, smudging a dramatic stain of Helm's blood. She looked as if someone had blown her apart with a shotgun.

Another man, thirtyish with a soup-strainer black moustache, glanced into the wreck then took Helm's arm. Helm climbed the slope to the road to avoid the humiliation of being dragged.

He knew that *nosokomeeo* meant 'hospital', having been to one the day before. The man with the black moustache seemed to be telling the old couple that he was taking Helm to one. When they asked about the woman, he gave an expressive shrug. The next remark included the word *tilefono*.

The old couple climbed into a black-and-rust pick-up truck and chugged away in the general direction of Athens. The man with the moustache called impatiently to his younger companion. He decided that he had finished being sick and tried to wash out his mouth at the stream. He spat out petrol-flavoured water with an oath.

"Lucky we came along," said the man with the moustache. "These wild donkeys have no sense." He too had a Greek-American accent.

"It was only a matter of time before one didn't leave me room enough to stop." Helm was sure that someone had thrown the animal into his path, but he had no proof.

"I see she took a shot at you. The broken window."

"Yes, just missed me." Helm found that his nose had stopped dripping.

"Lane sent us to collect you. We're taking you to a secure phone. Then the airport when Lane makes contact."

"About bloody time," growled Helm.

Lane's agents had a white Range Rover. Helm lay down on some cushions in the back, grateful for the opportunity to sort out his thoughts. He eased into a position that placed the minimum of pressure on the bruises on his bruises. One half of him was demanding to know what the hell was going on, the other half was telling him to go with the flow.

Doing the easy thing, or not doing anything, won easily. A few minutes later, on the other side of the rocky hump from which the donkey had been dropped, he saw black smoke rolling up to the bright blue sky. It was the faithful Fiat's funeral pyre. He hoped that Tsai had got out in time.

Alex had the moustache. His weak-stomached partner was called Yani. Helm sorted the names out before they reached the familiar streets of Valaki again. Alex parked at the steps up to his flat, out of sight round the back of the building. Packing took just a few minutes. Everything went into his cabin bag and a carrier bag. Yani loaded them into the Range Rover. Alex collected Tsai's tackle bag and had a good paw through it before putting it with Helm's luggage.

"Who was the Chinese bird working for? Makronotis?" said Helm as they set off around the bay on the Piraeus road.

Alex shrugged as if he neither knew nor cared. "Not us."

"Where are we going now?"

"Athens."

"Where in Athens?"

"Would the address mean anything to you?"

"I guess not," Helm admitted. "When will Lane call?"

"When he can get to a safe phone."

"Sometime today, though?"

"He reckons so."

Helm abandoned the attempt to gain precise information. He had no idea who, but someone famous had once said that his native language lacked a word to convey the same desperate sense of urgency of the Spanish *mañana*. Helm was convinced now that the unknown philosopher had to be Greek.

Alex and Yani created the impression that they were being paid by the hour, that they were prepared to carry on with the job for however long it took, even if they had to sit around with Helm and the secure telephone for a week. Their planning showed a certain inspired crudity.

Nobody was likely to carry out a post mortem on a donkey to find out its state of health before a car hit it, and such an animal was large enough to force a car to stop.

They weren't as pretty as gun-toting Tsai, but both parties had come within an inch of terminating John Scott within one single minute. Helm felt entitled to show no gratitude to Alex and Yani for being rescued from Tsai.

A policeman waved a line of cars to a halt as the Range Rover entered the port city of Piraeus. He walked down the line and tapped on Alex's window.

The drivers in front began to realize that they were innocent of unsuspected crimes and sneaked away. Another cop peered in at Helm through dark glasses, clutching across his chest a West German submachine gun of the sort displayed by British policemen at airports during terrorist alerts. Helm gave the cop a weak smile.

The policeman at the driver's door completed his questions. He moved round to the back to open the rear door of the Range Rover. "You are the English tourist in the car crash?" he said in excellent English.

"Well, yes," admitted Helm. Then he realized that he was supposed to be Irish. But there was no point in complicating things by being pedantic.

"These men are taking you to hospital?"

"That's right."

"You are injured?"

"Cuts and bruises." Helm's left cheek felt swollen. The crash had given him an all-round battering to go with the explosion's assault from the rear.

"We will take you to police headquarters. We have a doctor there."

Helm looked at Alex, who shrugged. They could hardly argue with the police.

"Looks like you'll have to drop in at my flat for the drink I promised you," Helm said, attempting to re-establish contact when the police had finished with him.

"Maybe this evening," said Alex.

Helm picked up his cabin bag. The policeman with the submachine gun brought Tsai's tackle bag and the carrier bag over to the police car. Helm said nothing. He was dreading the interview at the police headquarters.

He had no sensible answers to questions about why Tsai had been left behind in the wreck, what he was doing in Piraeus with all that luggage when he was supposed to be going to a hospital in Athens,

why there was a gun in the crashed car and why the driver's window had a bullet hole in it. Somehow, pleading shock and confusion after the crash seemed rather too thin.

His mind was still full of questions, and empty of answers, when the police car circled the Hill of Ares and dived headlong into the city's traffic with siren blaring. Helm began to realize that he was heading out of Athens again when the road narrowed and rather tatty apartment buildings sprouted on both sides.

"Which police headquarters are we going to?" he asked the cop in the front passenger seat cautiously.

"New orders, sir." The spokesman gave him a confident smile. The cop with the submachine gun was driving.

Helm wondered how the cop had received his new orders. Then he recalled that *telepathy* comes from Greek roots. "Are we going far?"

"There in twenty minutes. Are your injuries troubling you?"

"No, not much." Helm wondered if he had been kidnapped by imposters. The two men were dressed like cops and armed like cops, but they behaved like well-trained servants. The driver seemed to think that he was taking part in the Monte Carlo Rally and somewhat behind his time schedule.

Helm braced himself in the back as the police car zoomed along the road to the east coast, making no concession to other motorists, pedestrians or wildlife. He hoped that the driver had applied the safety catch in case the submachine gun slid off his lap and jarred on the floor. When the car turned right, onto a minor road, Helm knew his destination.

A spur on the left from the coast road climbed to a walled villa. Heavy gates opened inward as the police car approached. It drew up at a columned porch. Two men in white jackets and dark blue trousers were waiting to meet it. Helm was six feet one, but his eyes were level with the mouth of the shorter member of the reception committee. The larger took charge of the luggage.

After a brief conversation in Greek – Helm recognized four words, none of which was much help to him – the English-speaking cop saluted him and said, "Good morning, sir." Then he got back into the police car, which rushed away with the same sense of urgency.

Helm entered the villa. He had no choice in the matter. He was rather outnumbered and a member of the Greek national heavyweight basketball team was holding his arm. In the hall, the luggage went one way and he descended a flight of steps to a cool, stone-lined chamber.

His escort marched him over to a blank stretch of wall. Helm was expecting to pass through a well disguised door into a secret passage. The ropes were around his wrists before he had a chance to react. The

big man hauled him up until his toes were just touching the stone floor.

"Hoi!" Helm squawked inadequately.

The huge servant tied off the ropes and just walked away without a word. His feet pattered on stone steps. A heavy door closed with a hollow thud. When the light went out, Helm was left in still darkness.

Gradually, his eyes became accustomed to the gloom. He was in a room about fifteen feet square and at the opposite end to the staircase. A band of dusty light was filtering in under the door. There were dark shapes against the other walls of the cellar – all too dim to have a distinguishable form. Helm felt like something out of a cartoon. He thought at first that the servant was just larking about. He kept expecting him to come sneaking back, laughing his rotten socks off. Helm's arms were creaking before he was sure that it was no joke.

Lancer and Stowe had sent him on a management training course once. It was designed to acquaint subordinates with a manager's problems, to make them more co-operative if they were not destined to rise out of the ranks. The organizers had encouraged the students to look for positive aspects to every situation, no matter how desperate.

Helm realized that he had nothing better to do to pass the time. After a lot of thought, he found just one positive aspect to hanging by his wrists, arms ready to scream with pain, toes barely touching the ground. His gaoler had used thick ropes instead of steel manacles. He could feel every rough fibre, but there was a certain cushioning effect. Manacles would have dug into his flesh.

He had heard that the spine relaxes when the compressing force of gravity is removed from the discs. That piece of information had come from a TV quiz programme. If Phileros Makronotis' minions kept him hanging long enough, he ought, in theory, be able to get his toes more firmly on the ground to take some of the strain off his arm sockets – which was another positive aspect of his position.

Then a negative intruded. He refused to wonder what would happen if he needed to pee and he could hold out no longer. Such practical problems are not covered by the cartoons. He turned his attention to a review of John Scott's career to take his mind off such unpleasant matters.

Scott had added an unexpected £24,500 to export consultant Robert Helm's building society account – even if the recipient might have a tough time getting home to spend it. He would have been back in England for four days, with the adventure behind him, had he refused to let his client mess him about. He needed some training in assertiveness.

He had been so overwhelmed by such a large sum of money that he had been prepared to bend in any desired direction to keep it, which

was a lesson for the future, if he had one. Bateman had exploited his insecurity. Bateman was a bastard. He was also a clever bastard if he wasn't tied up by the next set of ropes to John Scott's. But not that clever.

Despite Bateman's virtual paranoia about security, someone on Phileros Makronontis' staff had penetrated his scheme. Helm could think of no other reason for Tsai's appearance. She had been sent to look for the cassette – at gunpoint, if necessary. The convenient accident of being blown up together had solved the problem of an introduction. She had slid easily past Helm's guard.

If Alex and Yani were representative of Bateman's hired help, a breach of security seemed inevitable. They had shown precious little concern for Helm's safety – and none at all for Tsai's after the crash. Helm reminded himself that he owed no loyalty to someone who had kidnapped him at gunpoint, no matter how fanciable she might be.

He had to admit that dropping a dead donkey in front of a car was a pretty bloody effective way of making sure that it stopped – even if Tsai had damn near shot him by accident when they had hit the beast. They had crashed because Alex and Yani had overestimated the effectiveness of the Fiat's brakes.

On the other hand, the stupid donkey might just have fallen into his path. Hill-climbing donkeys lack the sure-footedness of goats and sheep. He could have been mistaken about seeing other moving shapes, which could have been human. The whole thing had happened too damn fast.

Alex and Yani might have been following him at a distance, stuck for a solution to the problem of a woman with a gun in Helm's ribs. It was possible that they had taken advantage of a genuine accident.

His analysis of the problem was far from penetrating but it was difficult to think clearly when strung up by the wrists in a billionaire's cellar. Even so, Helm realized that he could be certain only of a few pieces of the puzzle. Perhaps, if he hung about long enough, someone would turn up with a few explanations. And he would be expected to provide a few himself.

He was an Irishman called John Albert Scott and he had the passport to prove it. He knew nothing about Ireland because he had lived all of his life in England. How long his cover story would hold up when Makronotis' heavyweights started on him would be a matter of minutes rather than hours. There was nothing about heroics in his agreement with Bateman.

Bang! The café exploded again. Helm felt a rush of heat, light, pain and the angular shape of Tsai lying under him. There were four feet with

shins attached standing nearby, still wearing sandals – two small ones, a child's and the larger feet of her mother. Then he was awake.

Foggily, Helm realized that he had actually managed to doze off. The bang had been the cellar door hitting the wall. The light was electric – an unshaded bulb about a yard away. Incredibly, he had slept despite the ache in his arms, which were parting company slowly with his body. He had not grown at all. His toes seemed no closer to the ground than their original, tenuous contact.

Then he began to grow. His legs buckled under him. He descended to an awkward sprawl on the cold, stone floor. Loops of rope were peeled out of imprints on his wrists. A new position brought a different set of aches.

Helm felt like hugging his arms to his body, rolling on the floor and screaming his head off. But that was no way for a seeker of hazardous work for highest pay to behave. On the other hand, there was nothing about being a tough guy in his contract of employment . . .

"You can walk?" A male voice with a Greek-American accent interrupted Helm's mental debate. The remark was more of a challenge than a question, implying that hanging around for a few hours was nothing serious.

Helm wondered about kicking the old man to pieces. Instead, he followed him up the stone steps and into the hall. He had a feeling that the trouble was about to start in earnest now. This was where John Scott became a nasty smear on a tiled floor if he failed to come up with the right answers.

4. QUESTION TIME

THE OLD MAN LOOKED about eighty. He was on the short side, almost bald and he had a complexion like an old, brown-leather shoe. He was out of the same box as the old men who gathered in Valaki's bars in their dark blue peaked caps, swinging plastic worry beads and remembering when they were young and in charge. This old man had a posh, white suit and red socks. He also had a heavy object in the right-hand pocket of his lightweight jacket.

In the villa's spacious hall, the old man let Helm take a long look at a self-loading pistol just like Tsai's. He put it away again as he pointed to a dark brown door. Helm found himself in a washroom. His first thought was whether he could remove the frosted slats of the louvred window. A black Doberman guard dog wandered past outside. Helm discarded the idea.

When he had finished in the washroom, the old man took him to an adjoining room. It was small, bare and it had a mosaic floor of dolphins and geometric designs. The window was half-open – onto the area patrolled by the Doberman and a couple of his mates.

Helm lowered his bruises onto one of the two black-leather chairs, which stood on either side of a dark table that was inlaid with gold wire and mother-of-pearl. Assorted glasses, a bottle of *Courvoisier* cognac and a bedewed bottle of mineral water stood on the table.

"Have a drink," said the old man.

Helm had remembered, just in time, that it might not be safe to drink from the washroom cold tap. The chilled litre bottle of mineral water was half empty after his first assault. He filled the glass again, then he remembered to look at his watch. It was ten past nine. He had been hanging around in his black hole for an hour and a half.

The old man had poured himself a healthy measure of cognac – he clearly had no inhibitions about drinking alcohol so early in the morning – and he had lit a flattened, Turkish cigarette, which seemed a rather radical gesture for a Greek.

He fixed Helm with a penetrating stare from the other armchair. "Your name is John Scott. You were born in Kilkenny in the Irish Republic thirty-one years ago. You have an English accent. Your parents emigrated when you were very young?"

Helm replied with a shrug. The matter was unimportant.

"And now, you are here in my country to spy on Phileros. There two are ways to loosen your tongue. Three, if we include letting the Dobermans have you instead of Phileros' Imperial Guard. You saw two of them when you arrived – all over two metres tall."

"I should have thought ways one and two are quite enough," Helm said with a shudder. "What's way one?"

"I am. How much do you know about the man you are spying on?"

"He's got pots of money. I suppose he owns that hotel in Elousis Square? Along with his yacht, this villa and lots of other bits and pieces the length and breadth of this ancient land. And abroad. Not to mention the local police."

"Phileros is a man of wealth, influence and honour. He began humbly, as an orphan, who seemed destined to become just a shepherd. Then, when he was about twenty years old, he found parts of a statue from Classical times. He showed them to a professor of archaeology, who paid him a small sum to be taken to the site, dug up the rest of the statue, restored it and accepted the credit for reviving a lost piece of our cultural heritage.

"There was no credit for the humble shepherd, of course. So, when he continued to explore the site, and he found a cave full of intact statues, he forgot the professor. He sold a statue to an Armenian trader in antiquities. Who cheated him, of course. But he had sold the most insignificant of the statues and he learned the worth of the others.

"His next sale was direct to a collector. He sold everything in cave over the next two years. It contained both Greek and Roman relics. We believe a party of Romans, looting for their emperor, were ambushed by patriotic Greeks. If they were not wiped out, the survivors were too afraid to return to the cave.

"This accident of history was the foundation of the Makronotis fortune. Phileros used the money from the statues to finance other deals and to educate himself. Did you know the former orphan shepherd now holds two doctorates?"

"I don't know his shoe size either." Helm refused to be impressed.

"The Irish are said to be a humorous race." The old man let the criminal ignorance of a spy pass with a mocking smile of disbelief. "Phileros built his start in the business world into a vast fortune. He was in shipping, including oil tankers, when it was profitable. He diversified his interests, moving constantly from the old to the coming market. But

all the time, he remembered how he began.

"As a man of honour, he knows the statues belong in Greece. This is why he buys them back. One day, when the collection is complete again, it will be discovered anew and presented to the nation with a museum to house it."

"All right," Helm shrugged. "All successful businessmen have the instincts of crooks. Makronotis is a crook with a conscience. What's that got to do with the price of fish?"

"It tells you what sort of man you have spied on. With immense wealth comes great power and influence. I need not remind you how you arrived here, Mr. Scott."

"All right, so he can order the police around. I'm impressed. Is that what you want me to say?"

"I want a complete account of how you came to be in my country – who sent you, how much you were paid, what your assignment is and your progress with it."

"You don't want bloody much, do you?"

"If I have to use force to make you talk, you may be killed accidentally. Do you doubt we could ask the police to inform the Irish embassy of a fatal car crash?"

"What's to keep me out of the crash even if I talk?"

"The personal guarantee of Phileros Makronotis?"

"Which is worth what?" scoffed Helm. "In his villa, miles from anywhere with no witnesses who'd dare contradict him?"

"Think for a moment, Mr. Scott. On that basis you have two choices. One, you talk and we kill you. Two, we torture you, you talk and we kill you."

"Put like that, there's no choice at all."

"I thought you looked a sensible young man. I will tell Phileros. He should be here within half an hour."

"Do I get to know your name? Or will you answer to 'Hey, you!' when more people get here?"

"Ianos Makronotis. Phileros' foster father. I gave him a name and a home. He has shown me the world and encouraged me to educate myself. I have the face of an old peasant but the manners of a gentleman. I am also completely loyal to my adopted son. As he is to me."

"You've created your own order of chivalry?"

"You could call it that. Make no attempt to leave this room. You might find it . . . painful."

Helm poured out the last of his bottle of water as the old man left. He had fallen into the clutches of a self-made man with a murky past, which Phileros Makronotis proposed to rewrite for his own greater

glory. The reason why Helm was a prisoner now was that his employer, the suddenly elusive Mr. Bateman, had left him high and dry for no reason. And if Bateman had failed to take his chance, it was time for Helm to think of number one and take the best deal available.

Phileros Makronotis arrived ten minutes late but he offered no apology. He brought his own leather chair into the small room, pushing it on smooth-running castors. There were no bodyguards present but his foster father kept his right hand in the bulging pocket of his jacket.

Makronotis was half a head shorter than Helm and a good four stones heavier. He carried his bulk with an unhurried grace. He was clearly happy with his size and not the sort of person to apologize for deviating from the ideal weight for his height.

He looked cool, calm and collected. The deadly, casual insult sprang automatically into Helm's mind: 'Yer don't sweat much for a fat lad!' He knew better than to voice it, however. Makronotis might be civilized enough to laugh off abuse from a prisoner. On the other hand, he might have a Mafioso's appetite for fear-induced submission. He might call in one of his Imperial Guard to swat the offender.

The old man had brought another bottle of water. Helm refilled his glass, telling himself that it was too late to worry about truth drugs and re-sealed bottles. Ianos poured himself more brandy as his foster son made himself comfortable. The leather chairs were soft and silent. They made no farting noises when someone moved on them.

"Begin," commanded Phileros Makronotis.

"Almost three weeks ago, I put an advert in several British papers," said Helm. "It read: 'Man with terminal condition, not incapacitated as yet, seeks hazardous work for highest pay.' I went into hospital for an exploratory operation, then I met a client. That was two weeks ago tomorrow. The man's name is Bateman. He paid me twenty-five thousand pounds to get you on videotape.

"I arrived here the next day, a Thursday. I took the pictures of you on the Wednesday and Thursday of the following week. Then I tried to deliver the cassette to a contact over here. He kept putting me off. I tried to meet him at various places, including the café that was blown up yesterday. That's where I met your agent, Miss Yuan-lin. Then we were in a car crash this morning . . ."

"Yes, yes." Makronotis dismissed the crash with a wave of a large hand that was laden with gold rings. "Where is the cassette now?"

"Under a rock two point two kilometres from Valaki on the Athens road. It's roughly heart-shaped with a big bunch of purple flowers growing just behind it."

Ianos Makronotis went to a telephone somewhere behind Helm. He

issued brief orders in Greek.

"Describe Bateman," said Phileros Makronotis.

"About forty-five," said Helm. "About your height, average sort of build, dark hair going grey, wears a green cap, sounds like he's from London."

"An interesting story. Tell me now why I should believe it."

"Check on it, and you won't find any holes. The advert's in back numbers of the newspapers. And you're on the videocassette."

"You are dying? You expect me to believe that was your reason for taking the job?"

"It's not as simple as that. I haven't had the results of some tests yet. I shot over here the day after I had the operation. I've still got the stitches in me."

Makronotis took a personal radio from his pocket. Helm caught the word *yatros*, which he knew means 'doctor'. The rest was beyond his limited Greek. A tall man in a white labcoat brought a black case into the room a few minutes later – the billionaire's personal physician. Helm described as much as he could remember of what had happened in the hospital. Then he took off his sweatshirt.

"How do you know this wound was not caused by the bomb?" Makronotis said in English as the doctor peeled off a dressing.

"See how it has healed?" said the doctor. "I would say it is two weeks old. The stitches should come out."

"Help yourself," said Helm, feeling like a side of beef being examined by two meat inspectors.

Scissors snipped. Emerging stitches tugged at his flesh. The doctor went round Helm's back, ripping off plasters. Just two needed replacing. Helm lowered his trousers and lost a little more dark body-hair. The doctor applied one fresh dressing, and used a pair of tweezers to haul out a half-inch needle of glass, which had started to emerge from Helm's left thigh. He repacked his case and left in response to a nod of thanks from Phileros Makronotis.

"So part of your story is true," said Makronotis. "Not that I believe all of it yet. The checks will continue."

The billionaire left the room at his confident, stately pace – the same irresistible force that Helm had watched crossing the pavement in Elousis Square. Makronotis opened the door for his foster father and let him go first. Helm poured himself another glass of mineral water. He had developed a nervous thirst.

A few minutes later, he realized that he would have to make room if he intended to drink any more. He crossed the door to the hall, heels tapping on the mosaic floor, and tried the handle. To his surprise, it turned. The hall was empty. The Doberman and its mates were still

prowling around beyond the washroom's louvred window.

Helm made use of the facilities, washed with pink, scented soap and dried his hands on a thick, white towel with a blue border and a $\pi\mu$ monogram in one corner to remind him that Greek billionaires put their initials on their towels in their native language.

He returned to the room with the armchairs apparently unobserved, suspecting that the lack of interest in his movements was a psychological ploy designed to intimidate him. The message seemed to be: *Try running away and see how far you get!*

His luggage arrived a short while later. Helm tried his Chinese radio. Nothing happened when he switched it on. He refused to believe that the batteries were dead. Someone had replaced them the wrong way round. Someone had unscrewed the fasteners to look inside the radio's case. There were fresh, sharp scratches on the plastic around the screws.

The batteries in his electric razor were facing the right way but the screw heads bore a screwdriver's traces. Helm had no system for packing his cabin bag but he was sure that it had been searched, along with his carrier bag. Clearly, Phileros Makronotis employed a security staff that left little to chance. When they hoped to find was a mystery – unless they expected Helm to have a full range of bugs and other James Bondery.

There was a French programme on the BBC World Service. Helm twiddled the tuning dial until he found a fast-talking Italian, who was playing British and American rock music. He sprawled in his chair and drank the last of his mineral water. Makronotis and his ancient foster-father were back in the room before Helm noticed them. Wearing a pained expression, the billionaire asked him to turn the noise off.

"I received these facsimiles from London," Makronotis handed several flimsy sheets of slick, A4-size paper to Helm. "You were telling the truth about your advertisement."

Helm just glanced at the blocky reproductions of sections from back issues of British newspapers. He refused to be impressed by the routine use of modern technology. Lancer & Stowe could do just as well. The advertisement looked quite impressive, though, and it stood out from the boring rubbish around it in each of the newspapers.

"I now have a copy of your video," added Makronotis. "The original has been resealed exactly as you packed it and buried again in exactly the same place."

"That was a waste of time for a start," scoffed Helm. "My client hasn't seen it, so he has no idea where I put it or how I wrapped it."

"I see no harm in being thorough. You will now telephone to your client to arrange another meeting."

Ianos Makronotis had removed the empty mineral water bottles to

make room for the telephone. Helm dialled his contact number, assuming that the call was being recorded elsewhere in the villa. As usual, he heard five rings, then a succession of soft beeps.

"Yeah?" said a male voice after a delay of ten seconds.

"It's John Scott," said Helm. "Calling Mr. Lane." With a sense of inner contentment, he used the code to warn Mr. Lane that he was under duress or surveillance. He enjoyed putting one over on the all-powerful Makronotis under his very nose.

Bateman/Lane responded to the request for a meeting by giving him the address of a restaurant in the suburbs of Athens, and promised to be there at eight o'clock. Lane gave no sign that he knew that his agent had pushed the panic button and Helm resisted, with an effort, an impulse to grin.

"Thank you, Mr. Scott." Phileros Makronotis smiled at him when Helm had replaced the receiver. "You are being extremely co-operative."

"The other Mr. Makronotis said it would be easier for your police to explain away an accident if the victim still had all his finger- and toe-nails." said Helm.

Phileros Makronotis looked at his foster-father and swallowed a smile. The beats of a helicopter's rotors filtered in through the half-open window. It landed nearby for a few moments, then took off again. One of the Imperial Guardsmen entered from the hall, pushing a trolley laden with a silver coffee service, cups and a plate of fancy biscuits.

Another large bodyguard pushed another trolley into the room as coffee was being served. This trolley sported a television set and a videorecorder. The bodyguard plugged everything in to a socket near the telephone point, and handed the remote controller to his boss.

Makronotis played Helm's tape when the bodyguards had gone. He saw himself leave his hotel in Elousis Square four times and arrive four times. In between were five long sequences showing passers-by in front of the Hotel Renga but not Phileros Makronotis.

"An interesting viewpoint," he said after a second viewing of the tape. "Taken from one of the second-floor windows overlooking the main entrance to my hotel?"

"Close, but no cigar," Helm said through a mouthful of chocolate biscuit. Breakfast was a distant memory. The prisoner was taking a hearty elevenses. His distressed metabolism was crying out for food.

"How, then?"

"I thought about a window, but I couldn't work out how to get to one at any time of my choosing," said Helm. "The roof was out, too. Your people check every part of every building that overlooks the entrance to your hotel with their binoculars. But if you go down to the nearest corner of the square from the Hotel Renga, there's a car showroom for

big, expensive cars, a café, a dress shop for the well-off and another hotel on the corner. The *Anatoli*. A lot cheaper than yours. Next to it, making the corner, there's a fur shop and a jewellers. Above both of them is a large neon sign. You must have seen it millions of times. Red and white letters."

"You put your camera on the advertising sign? How?" Makronotis said with a frown.

"I noticed a frosted window belonging to the hotel that was level with the sign. It's a bathroom shared by the people on that floor. All I had to do was book in at the Hotel Anatoli for a couple of days, wait till the middle of the night, reach out of the bathroom window, clamp my camera to the sign and line it up.

"I had a simple radio-control unit with a start button. Switch on to start the camera, switch off to stop it. The unit also picked up some stray signals from someone else. Those were the parts when you weren't in the shot. I taped you going and coming at the hotel last Wednesday and Thursday. Then I recovered the camera and wrapped up the tape ready for delivery."

"You could have put a gun there instead of a videocamera," said Ianos Makronotis.

"That occurred to me," nodded Helm. "My client could have been looking for a new approach to assassination. I was thinking about giving your hotel a ring from the airport on my way home. To drop a hint to your security mob."

"Was this a vague idea or a firm plan?" said Phileros Makronotis.

"One or the other." Helm's smile gave nothing away. In fact, the idea had just occurred to him, but there was no harm in muddying the waters.

Makronotis ejected the cassette from the player. He left again with his foster-father, opening the door for the old man on the way out. When he had been alone for five minutes, Helm decided to make use of the telephone. He had to press so many keys to call Maidstone from Greece that he got lost half way through. He was more careful with his next attempt.

Dr. Bennett's receptionist assumed that Helm was ringing to make an appointment at last. Helm needed another test. He told the receptionist that he was stuck in Greece – which was the literal truth – and added that he hoped to be home in a few days. He felt like ending with a mocking laugh as he replaced the receiver. Home in a wooden box looked a distinct possibility if old Ianos got his way.

A quarter of an hour later, when the coffee pot and the biscuit plate were empty, an Imperial Guardsman opened the door. He pointed to Helm's luggage and beckoned. Helm followed him across the hall to an

empty broom cupboard; which began to descend unexpectedly. Helm's next destination was a small sitting room at cell level.

His new quarters contained two wooden chairs with green padding, a couch upholstered in matching deep, acid green, a metal table with a white plastic top and a tall window. Helm crossed to it immediately, wondering how an underground room could have a window. He discovered that the villa had two levels. A ledge on the cliff face had been fenced off as a terrace.

An Imperial Guardsman was leaning against the terrace's guard-rail, back to the sea. Helm climbed into the window recess to find out who needed the sentry. With a rush of surprise, he recognized the man in the beach chair. He was middle-aged, tanned, wearing a dark green cloth cap even though he was in the shade, and his name was sometimes Bateman.

5. TIME OUT

BATEMAN WAS SITTING at a typical, circular café-style table in the shade of a white-and-pink-striped umbrella. A black executive briefcase lay flat on the table. Helm assumed that it contained a portable telephone. His call and the secret warning had been a complete waste of time if Bateman was a prisoner of the Makronotis organization too.

The window moved. Helm pulled his weight back quickly. A dozen foot-square panes were set in an iron frame. The frame seemed in no immediate danger of dropping onto the terrace but it did shift another fraction of an inch when he pushed against it. Helm remembered that he was in earthquake country.

The senior partner of Lancer & Stowe had been in Athens in the winter of 1981. Douglas Lancer had returned on the first available flight, full of horror stories of a shaking felt all round the Gulf of Corinth.

There had been three main earthquakes, which had been followed by thousands of aftershocks. About twenty people had been killed and several hundred injured. Four million people had fled from Athens. The government had experienced great difficulty in persuading them to go back to work when the danger was over.

Douglas Lancer had lost everything – his personal luggage, his files of correspondence and his comprehensive sales kit for the trip. His hotel had collapsed inconveniently – but, luckily, while he had been out of the city on a field trip. He no longer travelled to Greece, Crete, Yugoslavia or Italy.

Belgium had joined his personal list of no-go areas about two years later. Incredibly, Lancer had been in Liege when an earthquake at two in the morning had caused extensive damage to the area around the main station. A few pieces of ornamental stonework had fallen off his hotel, and a chandelier had made a mess of the lobby carpet, but the building had survived a strong shaking in good condition. Even so, Lancer had been off down the E40 to Ostend as soon as he had found a way out of the city.

Helm had always envied the senior partner's ability to dine out on *two* earthquake stories. He assumed that his sister had a whole bunch of them now, if Steph was working in Yokohama. Nothing terribly exciting had ever happened to him – until the medical profession had got him into its clutches and he had put *that* advertisement in the newspapers.

Douglas Lancer had become a mine of information on earthquakes. If anyone ever started an *Earthquake Book Club*, he would be the first member. Helm remembered one of Lancer's pieces of advice for those unfortunate enough to have to visit earthquake country: 'If you have to go to Greece, choose the end of the week. It's probably just a statistical quirk, but most major Greek earthquakes have occurred on a Tuesday.'

Helm pressed the button to display the day and date on his digital watch. Red characters told him *TUE:31:AUG*. He was in so much trouble now, he told himself, that an earthquake would be just a superfluous act of sadism by a vindictive Supreme Being.

If an earthquake shook his window out and let him slide down to the terrace, he would still have to dive thirty-odd feet into the sea to escape. Helm wasn't much of a swimmer and he didn't fancy having to dodge boulders shaken loose from the cliff.

He settled down on the couch and turned to his Greek phrasebook for amusement. The author had failed to include a section for readers who were being held prisoner in a dungeon by a dangerous billionaire.

Such phrases as *Please tell your servant to stop killing me!* or *Being buried alive is against my religion!* seemed useful to know in the circumstances.

Helm was sitting at the window, listening to the one o'clock news on the BBC World Service, when someone entered his cell. He heard a tray land on the table with a rattle of crockery. He was ready for some lunch. Despite being at the mercy of a man, who could treat the local police force as his own private army, Helm had not lost his appetite.

"Long time no see," said a familiar voice.

"Enter the Chinese Mafia," said Helm. "Are you going to tell me one false move and you'll shoot me?"

"No gun now." Tsai displayed empty hands. Her plain blue T-shirt and matching jeans were both tight enough to leave no hiding place for a pistol.

"You got out of the car okay? You're not hurt?"

"Bruises only. Throw T-shirt away. Too much blood."

"Half a pint of mine. Which I could do with having back. Those two blokes thought you were bloody well dead."

"I look bloody dead," said Tsai with a cheeky grin.

"But you did want me to leave you? And you got out of the car before the fire?"

"Not want to go with your friends. I break window with bullet hole. Then fire start under hood. I run like hell. Then big bang."

"Probably a spark from a loose wire hanging off the battery," Helm said knowledgeably.

Tsai gave him an uncomprehending smile and a shrug of indifference. "Bring lunch."

She had brought two of what Helm had come to call *Greekburgers* – pieces of charcoal-grilled lamb garnished with oregano, onion and tomato and stuffed in a pocket in a flat, wholemeal bun, which seemed to have a lot more in common with a big, unsweetened rock cake than English bread.

Tsai had also brought a carafe of red wine and a vacuum jug of coffee. Helm attacked the food gratefully. He was not sure if it was a side-effect of his anaemia, but he could eat his fill at one meal, take no exercise and still be ravenous at the next mealtime.

"About those two blokes," Helm said when they had finished their Greekburgers, "did you recognize them?"

"Not work for Mr. Makronotis," said Tsai. "Hoodlums. Pay money, they throw dead mule at car. Want you only."

"So that's why you played dead?"

"When they go, I run to phone and get you back."

"Maybe I should have told them to take you as well. I could have been on a plane home by now."

"So why you help me, John?"

Helm remembered in time that his name was John Scott. "I guess I didn't trust someone who'd just chucked a dead donkey at me. Any more than I trusted someone who'd shoved a gun in my ribs. But you're better looking than them. So you work for Makronotis?"

"Special agent. Tsai Bond," she added with a smile.

"Do you know the bloke on the terrace? In the dark green cap. Don't lean on the window, it's loose."

"Green hat? Must be Roger Gladwin. One security advisor." Tsai knelt in the window recess and squinted down. "Yep. That him."

"Makronotis has got more than one? Security advisor?"

"Three: English, American, German. I work for Yank."

Helm poured more some coffee into the cups while he digested the latest information. He had been working for Phileros Makronotis all along. Security advisor Roger Gladwin had called himself Bateman in England while recruiting a 'dying' man for a desperate mission. He had been Mr. Lane on the phone in Greece.

Robert Helm, whose impending extinction felt further off now, had given the Elousis Square radiomen something else to check for – radio-controlled guns attached to advertising signs. All he had to work out

now was why Gladwin-Bateman-Lane had played so hard to get when Helm had obtained clear evidence of his employer's vulnerability.

"Does he know you? Gladwin?" said Helm.

Tsai shook her head. "All security advisors independent. German work here. Gladwin come from Corinth for conference."

"So if you work for the Yank, you're here on a special assignment?"

"Work direct for Mr. Makronotis. Find bad guy. You."

"If you think I'm such a bad guy, how come you're having lunch with me?"

"You neutralized. No threat."

"What if I grabbed you and threatened to break your neck if they don't let me go?"

"You do that to me, John?" Tsai looked at him with shock tinged with amusement.

"Well, maybe not to you," Helm admitted. "What about old Makronotis? Ianos? He's got it coming."

"Guard shoot you. Bang! No question. You know *kung fu*, John?"

"Me? No chance."

"You grab me, John Scott, I break your arm."

"You'd do that to me?" Helm looked deeply offended.

"Maybe just throw you across room," laughed Tsai. "You finish lunch?"

"Guess so." Helm gulped down the last of his coffee, appalled that his petite companion could be so confident about breaking his bones and hurling him across the room.

"Now, you have conference."

Tsai took Helm back to the lift and up to the hall. She left him in an office, flashing a bright smile on her way out. Helm drifted over to the desk to glance at the papers on it. The embryo industrial spy was surprised to find everything written in Greek. He had not considered the possibility that anyone at the villa might conduct business in a language other than English, even though it happened every day at Lancer & Stowe, plc.

The view from the window was spoiled by a stone boundary wall. He could see some sea and Evvoia Island in the distance. A Doberman watched him with threatening, brown eyes from a patch of shadow at the wall. The dogs were as potent a threat as machine-gun towers.

Helm saw down in another black-leather chair and resisted the temptation to plant his heels on the mahogany desk top. He knew that it was solid wood, not just veneer stuck on something cheap.

Phileros Makronotis didn't have to put up with substitutes for the real thing. Helm wondered idly how big a herd of cows had been exterminated to provide the villa with so many matching black-leather chairs.

Makronotis was in the habit of playing chess with his tripartite security staff; either from straight paranoia or a genuine fear of assassination. The score in the current match seemed to be *Germany nil, England one* at the moment. Quite how the American team fitted into the picture remained to be seen.

Helm assumed that some sort of review of the game was in progress. He was being kept hanging around to fill in any details that remained unclear. With any luck, Makronotis would put him on his personal and private jet to speed him home to spend his earnings before the day was out.

The billionaire breezed into the office as Helm was becoming bored with his own company. Makronotis held about three inches of a Churchillian cigar. He looked as if he had enjoyed a good lunch. He took a frosted can of *Heineken* from a fridge disguised as a bookcase and placed it on the desk in front of Helm.

Helm picked it up quickly before it could make a ring and wiped the polished surface dry with his sleeve.

"You know now what you were doing, Mr. Scott?" Makronotis draped a fairly friendly smile across his heavy features.

"Playing musical spies with your security people," nodded Helm. "Just how serious was it?"

"They were playing for keeps, as the Americans say."

"You mean I could have been killed? For real?"

"That was why Mr. Gladwin paid you twenty-five thousand pounds. I quote, 'Man in terminal condition wishes to bet a shortened life against a lot of money.' Mr. Gladwin saw your advertisement in his newspaper and he suggested a training exercise. How close could a desperate man get to me? Naturally, all parties placed bets on the result. We Greeks have a reputation for gambling but I can assure you, the urge is equally strong in all parts of Europe."

"How did Tsai fit into all this?" said Helm.

"Miss Yuan-lin received the training exercise of learning the method of assassination, or bringing the assassin to me. She had trouble at first because she was looking for an English assassin, not someone like yourself with an Irish passport through his father. A failure of her briefing."

"Why was I kept hanging around for so long when I'd made the tape of you at your hotel?"

"When he reported your success, Mr. Gladwin had won his contest with Mr. Erlich. Miss Yuan-lin was given a further week to identify the alleged assassin – in highly artificial circumstances, admittedly. A matter of searching for a common face at various rendezvous points. But she succeeded in the end."

"We could have been killed by that bomb yesterday," protested Helm.

"That was an uncalculated risk, but you were well paid for your services, Mr. Scott."

"What about Tsai sticking a gun in my ribs?"

"Miss Yuan-lin is fully trained in its use. As I told you, it was a training exercise under real conditions."

"What about the dead donkey Gladwin's men chucked at us? We could have been killed in that crash."

Makronotis frowned across his desk. "I fail to understand your attitude, Mr. Scott. You believe you may be dying, so you decided to risk your life to have a little enjoyment first. But I see you sitting before me with no more than superficial injuries. Certainly well enough to spend your earnings in any way that you wish. Had the risks been less, you would not have been paid as much."

"Maybe I didn't realize how real your real conditions would be," Helm admitted. "So I can go home now? No bullet in the back from your foster-father on the way out?"

"Old Ianos should have been in the movies," chuckled Makronotis. "He was wasted as a shepherd. He has a room full of gangster and spy movies on videocassette now. One thing more, Mr. Scott. I owe you congratulations for warning Mr. Gladwin that you had been exposed even as I listened to your conversation without suspicion. You used a code phrase?"

"Right," nodded Helm.

"That was another winning bet." Makronotis offered a chubby hand across the desk.

Helm submitted to a mild crushing from an unexpectedly strong grip.

"Goodbye, Mr. Scott. Your luggage is in the hall. My helicopter will take you to the airport. Your flight for London leaves at two o'clock. I wish you good fortune when your doctor tells you your test results."

Helm shrugged. "Back to earth with a bump, now."

One of the tall Imperial Guardsmen was waiting with Helm's luggage. His first ever helicopter ride lasted less than ten minutes and took him to the airport with half an hour to wait. He was rather relieved when the Dan Air flight climbed over Valaki, taking a horde of tanned holiday-makers home. He had been half-expecting the police to drag him out of his seat on Makronotis' orders to take part in another of the security staff's war games.

Helm telephoned his local health centre from Redhill station while waiting for a connection to Paddock Wood. The receptionist at the evening surgery sounded as if she had lost a bet that he would never, ever return to England. She gave him an appointment at ten-thirty the next morning.

When he got home, toward the end of the evening rush hour, Helm had to struggle to open his front door. A two-week accumulation of free newspapers and mail had created a formidable barrier. He dumped his luggage in the sitting room and went to the fridge.

The beer was all right but he realized that everything else would have to go. The vegetables in the rack and the fruit in the bowl in the sitting room were also candidates for the dustbin. He would be dining out on his first evening home.

Helm exchanged his leather jacket for a thick jumper. Southern England at the end of August was half as hot as Athens in degrees Centigrade. His house felt positively freezing to a man just back from the Mediterranean. Brandy seemed more appropriate than beer, but he pulled the ring anyway.

He switched on the central heating, turned the sitting room radiator full on and dropped onto a nearby chair to take stock of his position. He had a five-figure sum in his building society account. He had some new clothes, most of them in need of a wash, and some duty-free booze.

He still had his Irish Republic passport, John Scott's driving licence, \$350 in unused traveller's cheques and about 6,000 drachmas (worth about £25).

On the negative side, his body looked like a war zone with cuts and bruises from a terrorist bomb and an attempted assassination with a dead donkey. He was sure that he had a whole lot of grey hairs waiting to show through when the black ones dropped out. He had also acquired a taste for the Greek sun, which made grey old Maidstone look as welcoming as Siberia in mid-winter.

Suddenly, it was dark; and warm, thanks to the central heating. Helm realized that he had dropped off to sleep with the can of beer in his hand; fortunately, empty at that point. There was enough light filtering in from the street to allow him to see his watch.

Midnight had gone to someone on Athens time, but the local chip show was still open for stomachs running on Maidstone time. He had chicken and chips with curry sauce for his supper, then he went to bed.

He was up at eight the next morning after a fairly sleepless night. The energy from his meal had revived him and he had lain awake in a darkened bedroom for at least two hours before his first period of sleep.

Half a gale blowing over from the North Sea had wakened him at intervals through the night. Strangely, he knew that he would not have to make up for his lost sleep by going to bed early that Wednesday evening. He seemed to open a separate sleep account each night and never have to carry a deficit forward.

The corner shop next to the newsagent provided a loaf for toast,

butter, eggs and a packet of bacon. His fortnight-old bread in the expanding plastic container had the consistency of pumice stone.

After breakfast, he gave the fruit bowl and the interior of the empty fridge a good clean with sterilizing fluid as an antidote to mould-bloomed oranges and cheese. He was well into making up a shopping list when the doorbell rang. Helm saw the dark green cap first. He opened the door wider.

"Who are we today?" he remarked. "Mr. Bateman, Lane or Gladwin?"

The security advisor shrugged. "Take your pick."

"I suppose you've come for the passport and the driving licence?" Helm followed the visitor to the centrally heated warmth of the sitting room.

"No, I've come for you." Gladwin took off his leather gloves.

"I thought the job was over?"

"This is another job. Starting immediately."

"But I'm supposed to be seeing my doctor in an hour and a half."

"Cancel it."

"Just like that?"

Gladwin reached into his black raincoat and took out a manilla envelope. It flopped open when he slapped it onto the dining table. Helm could recognize £25,000 in fifties at a glance now.

"How long will this job take?"

"Two days max. Home tomorrow, or Friday at the latest."

Helm reached for the telephone. Morning surgery had just begun. He had to wait five minutes for the engaged tone to end.

"You want to cancel, Mr. Helm?" The receptionist sounded baffled. "But Dr. Bennett is very anxious to see you."

Helm glanced at Gladwin, who was standing close enough to hear both sides of the conversation. "I'm afraid I can't make it this morning after all. Did he say anything about my test results?"

"I understand your haemoglobin's no lower, and the first biopsy was clear. But the consultant wants to repeat the procedure at the hospital after she had another look at your X-rays with the computer."

Helm made a quick decision. The waxy lump was harmless, to his relief. Some smart-arse computer had found something else suspicious. The odds remained the same – fifty:fifty.

Either the new find was benign or it wasn't. Either way, it was better to have £50,000 than £25,000 and two days wasn't going to make any difference. Helm gave an unreliable promise to arrange another appointment before the end of the week.

Gladwin made himself a huge egg and bacon sandwich while Helm carried out some essential shopping and deposited his latest fee in the building society. He packed more new clothing for the trip back to

Greece. Half an hour on successive motorways took Helm and Gladwin back to Gatwick. They landed at Athens airport in the middle of the afternoon, local time.

Gladwin knew very little about the new job. He had returned to Corinth in triumph on Tuesday evening. The telephone had roused him in the early hours of Wednesday morning. His orders were to fetch John Scott for an urgent job. Like a loyal, well-paid employee, Gladwin had got on with the job without wasting time asking questions.

The news from Greece in Helm's newspaper was a bomb story. He had read most of the article before he realized that it wasn't his bomb but another one, which had been planted the previous afternoon on a tourist bus. An alert American, a New York cop visiting relatives, had noticed a man of Arab appearance put a suitcase into the baggage compartment just ahead of his own luggage.

The cop had evacuated the bus on his own initiative half an hour later, when he had been unable to find the Arab among the passengers. There was an Identikit picture with the newspaper article. It showed a villainous character with a big, black moustache and long, dark hair – certainly not the sort of person anyone would want to meet down a dark alley.

Helm was surprised to learn that the latest one was a fourth of a recent series of bombs. The first two had exploded during his stay in Greece but he had not heard about them. Athens is recognized as the main European entry point for a whole spectrum of Arab terrorists. The author of the article found it rather significant that no Greeks had been killed or injured by the bombs, just foreign tourists.

Suspicion was hardening against the Abu Nidal faction of the PLO, but Lebanese Shi'ites, inspired by Iran, were still the co-favourites. There had been a great many blood-curdling issued when the accidental shooting down of a civilian airliner had forced Iran into agreeing a cease-fire to end the Gulf War with Iraq. The reporter thought that the threats were being put into belated effect now.

The Boeing 737 had touched down at Athens airport in the middle of yet another baking hot afternoon. The second helicopter ride of his life carried a sweating Robert Helm from the airport to the Makronotis villa on the opposite coast. Gladwin took him straight to the boss in his office.

A long table packed with telephones and other communications equipment filled one side of the room. Phileros Makronotis was sitting at his desk, apparently undisturbed by the half dozen people buzzing at the table on his left.

"I have another job for your, Mr. Scott," he told Helm after crushing his hand again. "My granddaughter has been kidnapped by Arab

terrorists. I want you to handle the ransom payment.”

Helm dropped onto a chair and gaped at the billionaire. Sneaking around making a video of an allegedly publicity shy businessman was hardly training for dealing with terrorists. He had been just another face in the crowd on the first job. The second required him to deal face-to-face with people who would kill him without a second thought if they didn't like the look of him. He was way out of his depth.

6. RANSOM AGENT

HELM HAD BEEN FEELING hot in the thirty-degree temperature outside. A sudden chill made him clammy in the air-conditioned room. "What are the details?" he croaked. His throat had gone very dry, even though his skin felt soaking wet.

Gladwin poured him a glass of mineral water, then sat down himself to hear the reason for his own 3,000-mile round trip.

"We received an alarm from a car bringing my granddaughter here from Athens last night," said Makronotis. "A security team found the car off the road and the driver badly wounded. Bloodstains at the scene suggested that he shot two of the kidnappers before they shot him. My granddaughter and her companions had gone."

"Who was with her?"

"A maid, and Miss Yuan-lin, who happened to be coming here. We received a call from a public telephone two hours later. The ransom terms are very simple. One million dollars for three women today, two million for two women tomorrow or three million for the sole survivor on Friday. The ones to die will be picked at random and we will not be told who they are. Your task is to take the money to them this evening. When the prisoners have been released, you will hand it over."

"That sounds a rather stupid thing to do," said Helm. "Putting myself at the mercy of terrorists. And I don't have a stupid bone in my body." He recalled the tag line from an American cop show.

Makronotis handed a sheet of paper across the desk, his heavy features set in a stern expression. "This is the text of your advertisement, Mr. Scott? Man with terminal condition? Or did you receive good news from your doctor?"

"I'm still in as much doubt as ever," said Helm. "I had to cancel my appointment this morning."

"But the receptionist did say you're no better," Gladwin reminded him helpfully.

"I believe your terms are twenty-five thousand pounds plus expense?"

said Makronotis. "And Mr. Gladwin has already paid the fee?"

"As a retainer. Which can be returned. And twenty-five grand is my minimum fee," Helm added, trying to buy thinking time.

"Would a further twenty-five thousand pounds help to persuade you? I take it dollars are acceptable?" Makronotis took a wad of dead presidents from a drawer of his desk.

Helm wondered how much was waiting in reserve. The odds remained the same; evens that another head would turn up. He knew that the hypothetical coin would land tails eventually if he kept tossing it. He had to ask himself if his winning streak could continue and if he was being offered enough money to accept the risk of dying before he could spend it. He also had to ask himself how annoyed Makronotis would be if he refused the job.

Robert Helm was a non-person in Greece. Thanks to Roger Gladwin's machinations, Helm was a non-existent Irishman called John Scott. If a non-person disappeared, who would ask any questions? People could die when Makronotis' security staff played their war games. If the billionaire had no further use for John Scott, he might tell Gladwin to give the unco-operative Irishman a fatal car accident as a going-away present.

On the other hand, Makronotis' staff and his foster-father were skilled in games of intimidation. They might just get on with the job of finding another sucker if Helm phoned for a taxi and headed back to the airport. But if he survived his encounter with the terrorists, Helm would be able to go home on the next flight to spend £75,000. He would never have a better chance to make so much so quickly.

Makronotis pushed the wad of notes across his desk, having read the course of the decision from Helm's face.

Helm pushed it back. "Could you have the equivalent in sterling put in my building society account at home?"

"See to it," Makronotis told Gladwin.

The security advisor nodded and left the office. He had shed his black raincoat but he was still wearing his dark green cap. Helm wondered if he was bald on top and embarrassed about it.

"Mr. Erlich will give you your instructions, Mr. Scott," Phileros Makronotis swept the cash back into his drawer and forgot about Helm. He gave his attention instead to a backlog of messages from the long table.

Using his initiative, Helm returned to the hall. He met a fortyish, compact man with a blond crew-cut. Erlich looked like a boxer, who had retired after a long and undistinguished career. His nose had a kink to the right. His left eyebrow looked well flattened.

Someone called Erlich could be either German or American. Helm waited for the accent.

"Okay, I've got a guy here to brief you." Erlich had an American accent. He led the way to yet another of the rooms that opened off the hall. This one had a carpeted floor and contained two big-screen television sets and shelves packed with films on cassette. Helm wondered if it was Ianos Makronotis' lair.

"Rinaldi, this is Scott. Do the business," said Erlich.

The door closed behind him as Helm crossed the room to the man in the armchair. Erlich, clearly, had little to say and a lot to do. Rinaldi was the equal of Helm's six feet one when he rose to his feet but his close-fitting clothes made him look slimmer. His hands had very long, slim fingers.

"Sit down, Mr. Scott." Rinaldi's fluent English had an Italian accent. "Before we begin, I must ask you to guarantee to keep this information confidential.

Helm shrugged. "Yeah, okay."

To his amazement, he found himself in the hands of a stage magician, who had been booked to give him a quick course in ways to beat a blindfold. Helm had always assumed that all illusionists use the same simple but highly effective trick when they drive a car blindfolded. Rinaldi knew half a dozen tricks for different circumstances.

The one that he thought would be of most use to Helm involved tensing his facial muscles into unnatural positions while the blindfold was being tied. In theory, he would create just enough slack to allow restricted vision when he relaxed again. The essence of the trick lay in concealing all such facial contortions from the person tying the blindfold.

After half an hour's practice, Helm's face ached but he had learned how to rest his head at apparently natural angles so that he could see a surprising amount below the bottom of the blindfold. There was no guarantee that he would be able to use the trick, but Erlich wanted him to have every chance to look at the kidnappers' faces, bodies, clothing and equipment. Helm drew some comfort from the session. If he was expected to make a report after the job was over, then Makronotis thought that he had some chance of surviving.

When Rinaldi had finished, Helm asked about his luggage. A huge Imperial Guardsman showed him to a bedroom on the villa's upper floor. His cabin bag and leather jacket lay on the bed. Helm looked up the number of the building society office in Maidstone in his diary and tried the telephone on the bedside table. Subtracting an hour and a half from the time on the bedside clock, he worked out that it was afternoon coffee-break-time in Kent. After endless pressing of keys, he got through to one of the staff then the manager, who confirmed that his account had received a second deposit of £25,000 in the last quarter of an hour.

Helm listened patiently to a sales pitch about the advantages of a higher-interest account – he wasn't paying for the call – then he rang off after promising to give the matter his urgent consideration. It was difficult to explain from a range of fifteen hundred miles that the vast sums now in his account were intended for jet-setting, that Robert Helm might be dead in a few hours' time if the terrorists turned nasty, or that he might expire from waxy lumps, or whatever was causing his anaemia, before the 90-day notice period for withdrawals expired.

The bedroom was air-conditioned to a comfortable living temperature rather than the frigid American standard. Helm spotted a small refrigerator by the window. It contained a dozen cans of *Heineken* in the body and two one-litre bottles of mineral water in the door. He opened a can of lager.

Erlich barged into his room without knocking. He had brought a black briefcase. He opened the lid to show a transparent plastic box, which filled the interior. "Okay, listen up," he said in a brisk tone. "The money will be in this. See these chains in the case? They limit how far you can open the lid. Wide enough to show the cash in the liner but not wide enough to get it out."

"They're pretty flimsy, the chains," said Helm. "A pair of pliers would make short work of them."

"They won't try anything like that when you warn them an incendiary will go off if you release the trigger on the handle. It also goes off if the case is subjected to sharp, mechanical vibrations, such as trying to break the plastic liner, which is polycarbonate and pretty well unbreakable anyway. Any rough stuff and the money burns up. And they get zip."

"And where will I be when the firebomb goes off?" said Helm. "Or do I get a personal fire extinguisher?"

"There's a twenty-second delay, and they won't dare try anything when you've told them about the incendiary."

"I suppose not. How much will the money weight?"

"About twenty pounds. Heavy, but not too heavy to carry comfortably."

"Right," said Helm sceptically. "How did they get hold of their prisoners? Was it something else the German guy cocked up? You'd think he'd give Makronotis' granddaughter a bullet-proof car, for God's sake!"

"I did." Erlich radiated expressionless hostility.

Helm frowned at him, too surprised to be embarrassed. "I thought you were the Yank?"

"That's Kaiser. And I didn't make a cock up. The maid panicked when some of the tear gas seeped through the filters after they ran the car off the road. She didn't just sit tight and wait, she tried to get out."

"I bet the first thing Makronotis does when he get her back is fire her."

"I reckon that's top of his list. So you're clear on the case? You have to keep up a light pressure on the switch in the handle. Let go, and blooie!"

"Got it," Helm said nervously. "I suppose the police have been kept out of this? And the Greek FBI? If they've got one."

"You think they'd let the boss hand a million bucks to a gang of A-rab terrorists?" scoffed Erlich.

"To be honest, yes. If they know what's good for them."

"This is a high-security operation, Scottie. Strictly on a need-to-know basis. So we don't need any cops charging around complicating things, okay? You're straight on the blindfold trick? Everything you see will help to track them down."

"Right," said Helm.

"Okay. You go in about two hours, at seven o'clock. You can eat in the dining room on the ground floor. Order what you want when you want it. And stay out of the way. And stay sober, okay?"

Thank you very much, Helm thought as the German left with the briefcase. He could scarcely believe that it would contain one million dollars the next time he saw it.

Helm finished his can, dropped it into the waste bin and went downstairs to see about some food. He had taken a very light lunch on the airliner because his body had told him that he had only just had his breakfast. He was starting to feel very tired suddenly.

He had no idea whether it was something associated with his anaemia, but he went into a very rapid slump at around six o'clock some evenings. He was over an hour fast in his new time zone but he knew that the solution would be the same. He yawned down the stairs in search of some reviving food.

To his surprise, he felt no particular anxiety about what was to come. He felt little of anything, really. He seemed insulated from his troubles. Phileros Makronotis wanted him to give a million dollars to murdering terrorists, who could afford to abandon him when he had delivered the ransom. They could hardly make their own position worse by killing him, however, and killing someone who had seen them could give them an illusion of greater security. Which was why he welcomed the bargaining power of the fire-bomb.

He was betting his life against £50,000 that he would survive to spend his grand total of £75,000. As always, the odds remained evens. He would return to England either alive or in a wooden box. If he was alive, he could spend the money. If he wasn't, the money didn't matter anyway.

In the meantime, all he could do was hope that the sense of numbness persisted after the tiredness passed. The last thing that he needed was a case of the nervous shakes – or worse, nervous diarrhoea!

Helm met Roger Gladwin in the dining room. The Corinth-based security advisor was making sandwiches by hacking thick slices from a baked ham. He had found some real, supermarket, white bread. Helm took over the assault on the joint when Gladwin turned his attention to a gadget that took stones out of olives.

“Ready to go?” said Gladwin. “Erlich briefed you?”

“I dropped a real clanger there,” Helm remarked. “I thought he was the Yank security advisor, not the German you used me to score off.”

“He went to an American language school in Krautland. Then he went to the States for his master’s degree in security studies. And he worked there for five years.”

“I take it you don’t get on with him?” Helm drew his conclusion from Gladwin’s contemptuous tone.

“He picked up all a Yank’s bad habits. Like going on about his degrees all the time and how much experience he’s got. Much too flash for my tastes.”

“You prefer to get on with the job without making a song and dance about it?”

“The first rule of security is don’t draw attention to yourself. But the grub’s bloody good here. And I’m usually a good forty miles from him.”

“I don’t like the sound of that incendiary in the case.”

“It’s a good story, isn’t it?” chuckled Gladwin. “If you believed it, so will they.”

“Right,” said Helm with an idiot grin of relief. He had been wondering what would happen if he developed cramp in his case-carrying hand and tried to change hands. He filled a cup with coffee from one of the vacuum jugs and tackled his sandwich with more enthusiasm. One small risk had just dropped out of the survival equation.

An hour before sunset, Helm and his million dollars boarded a bullet-proof Mercedes executive saloon. An Imperial Guardsman joined him, manoeuvring his two-metre frame into the back of the vehicle without difficulty. Dieter Erlich took the wheel. He muttered a final report to Phileros Makronotis, then he left the grounds of the villa.

Erlich headed north on the coast road at first, then he cut inland. Helm knew from a brief examination of the Greek equivalent of an Ordnance Survey map that there is a whole lot of wilderness to the north of Athens, which made it good bandit territory.

The hiss of the wheels changed its note as they moved to a rougher surface.

"Hey, Scottie, don't even *think* of bailing out of the car with the million bucks and running for it," Erlich called over his shoulder when they were some distance from the main road. "You wouldn't get ten yards."

"I hadn't thought of that," Helm told him. "But thanks for giving me the idea. It sounds very tempting."

The Imperial Guardsman glanced at Helm before he carried on loading cartridges into a pump-action shotgun. For all his size, he had a certain grace and he looked like a suitable model for heroic statuary.

"How come this car's so quiet, anyway?" Helm added.

"It's hydrogen-powered," said Erlich. "The same performance but totally non-polluting. The boss is trying to sell the idea to the Greek government."

Erlich drifted along secondary roads. Helm was completely lost when the car stopped, out of sight of the sea, twenty minutes later. He assumed that they were still within five or ten miles of the villa, but he had no idea of its direction. Darkness was closing in around them as thick clouds rolled in from Turkey, ruling out navigation by the sun in the forty minutes before it set.

Erlich lit a cigarette. Helm noticed that he smoked Camels – which was another misleading piece of information to suggest that Erlich, not yet-to-be-met Kaiser, was Tsai's boss, the Yank.

Dieter Erlich was a bad choice for the chauffeur's job, Helm decided. Phileros Makronotis would never employ such a battered character. He would have put the man who had won his fights and remained unmarked behind the wheel of one of his cars.

The modified Mercedes had stopped in a shallow valley. Its occupants could see at least half a mile of road ahead and behind. Low hills approached to within a quarter of a mile on left and right. Erlich had checked a compact submachine gun, which was little bigger than a pistol. The Guardsman had his shotgun. Nobody had thought to ask the passenger if he would like a personal protection device, though.

Suddenly, there were figures on the road – two male and three female. They had appeared out of nowhere, as far as Helm was concerned. Erlich behaved as if he had been watching them approach for some time. He reached for the switch to blink his headlights. The Guardsman had moved to the fold-down seat behind Erlich. He was scanning their rear for signs of people sneaking up behind them.

A dark figure waved an answering signal after inspecting the car through binoculars.

"Okay, Scottie, let's go," said Erlich. "Slow and easy. You know what to do?"

"Of course," Helm said with false calm.

His legs felt slightly rubbery as he set off along the dusty road. The others were about thirty yards away. He kept telling himself that the round trip was worth £50,000. One of the terrorists started to walk toward him. They met half-way. The masked man was wearing a camouflage jacket and dark jeans. He looked like one of the people who fire over the grave at an IRA funeral. He was holding his self-loading pistol in his left hand. He held out the right for the case.

"You speak English?" said Helm.

The masked man nodded.

"If I let go of this handle, a firebomb goes off and the money burns up," Helm told him with exaggerated clarity. "Do you understand that?"

The masked man nodded twice.

"I can open the case enough to show you the money, but if you try to cut the chains or break the plastic box inside, the money burns. Is that clear?"

The terrorist nodded again and moved to one side when Helm opened the catches, as if expecting a faceful of knockout gas. He peered into the case then shook his masked head. "No good. This could be paper. I must count it."

Helm looked back at the Mercedes uncertainly.

"No show money, no deal today. And two million tomorrow."

"He wants to count the money," Helm called to Erlich.

The Imperial Guardsman climbed out of the car. He brought a key to Helm, then he stood by with his shotgun at the ready. Helm turned the key in a hole at the hinge. He heard a loud, terrifying click. He reached cautiously into the case to unhook the chains. The plastic liner was two open-topped boxes, which fitted one inside the other.

The terrorist flicked through every bundle of notes, making sure that every note was a \$100 bill. Helm handed the bundles to him one by one, and he replaced them in the top of the plastic liner. Helm wriggled the base of the liner into position, replaced it in the briefcase, attached the security chains and closed the briefcase. He gripped the handle tightly before turning the key clockwise. Then he handed the key to the guard, who backed to the Mercedes with his finger on the trigger of his shotgun.

Helm and the terrorist backed away from the road. Helm sat on a boulder and rested the case on his knees. It was growing heavier and having a gun pointed at him made his legs feel weak. The terrorist waved a signal with his free hand.

The three women began to walk along the road. Helm had assumed that they were members of the gang, not prisoners. Tsai was the one nearest the other kidnapper, the granddaughter was in the middle and . . . The third one, a teenager in a black dress, started to run for her life.

She shot past Helm and dived into the bullet-proof protection of the car, sobbing loudly.

Helm raised his right hand in greeting as Tsai drew level. She waved back. The granddaughter, a slim girl with red hair pulled back into a pony tail, also waved. She looked about ten and she seemed to be enjoying her experience. When Tsai and the girl were safely inside the car, the Guardsman held up his left hand. He put the brass key on the road in front of the car, as agreed during earlier negotiations. Helm turned his watch to the stopwatch mode.

The kidnappers had agreed to give their former prisoners a start of fifteen minutes. Half a dozen masked men dashed out of the bushes as soon as the Mercedes was out of sight. One of them pointed a pocket-radio-size gadget at Helm. It began to emit rhythmic cheeps when he had twiddled the dial to the right setting. Helm sat still as the man moved behind him. Rough hands grabbed at the collar of his leather jacket. One of the terrorists slapped him across the face.

Frightened and angry, Helm raised the briefcase. "Do that again and I'll let go of the handle."

"What the hell's this?" The English-speaker held up a fat, button-like object, which he had detached from the inside of Helm's collar.

"Obviously, it's a bug. But I didn't put it there, okay?" Helm told him aggressively. "It must be so my people can find me when you lot have gone."

The hands continued to search him. The contents of his pockets ended up on the ground. One of the terrorists took a fancy to his book of traveller's cheques. Another grabbed his wallet. Removing his watch presented a serious problem. It had an expanding metal strap and he was holding the briefcase in his left hand.

"Tell this phucking idiot to leave my watch alone," said Helm. "It hasn't been off my wrist, so there can't be a bug in it. And I want my things back. Everything. Or I let go of this handle and you lose your million bucks."

Helm had heard that the only way to deal with terrorists is by ultimatum. Finding out if it was true was a fairly terrifying experience, even when he was angry.

The English-speaker snapped orders in remarkably fluent Greek for an Arab. He had to point his gun at one of the gang to force him to return a packet of mint imperials. The man seemed reluctant to believe that they were not some exotic British drug. Helm stuffed everything back into his pockets with his right hand. Another man gave the brass key to the English-speaker.

"The agreement was to wait five minutes," said Helm.

The English-speaker dropped the bug to the roadway and crushed it.

"They know you've found it now," said Helm. He held out his right hand for the key. It refused to turn in the safety lock.

The English-speaker pushed Helm's hand aside. He tried to turn the key both ways. Helm began to get a bad feeling about his £50,000 job.

If the firebomb was just a bluff, there was no reason to leave the wrong key. Helm began to think in terms of a charge of high explosive rather than just some sort of incendiary device. Phileros Makronotis could afford to blow a million dollars to bits to get his revenge on a bunch of Arab kidnappers.

"Let go of that handle and you're a dead man," grated the English-speaker.

"Tell me something I don't know," said Helm as one of the others pushed a shotgun into his face. He could smell burnt powder.

The weapon had a swivel below the muzzle for a carrying sling. The man reminded Helm more of one of the mob of brainless Sicilian country gangsters in the *Godfather* movies than of a Kalashnikov-toting Arab terrorist.

Helm sat on his boulder and hoped that the trigger finger wasn't itching. The others moved away to confer. All of them spoke what sounded like natural Greek. When they pulled off their masks without offering him a blindfold, Helm began to wave his £75,000 goodbye.

Every man had dark hair. Some wore a black moustache. The faces were pale, night-owl blobs in the fading daylight, which was too weak to show up features. Helm could hear a rumble of thunder behind the hills to his left. The Greek Gods were muttering about him.

All that was keeping him alive was the million dollars in his booby-trapped briefcase. If the terrorists got it away from him, or he let go of the handle, he was finished. Okay, so letting go of the handle would allow him to die a dollar millionaire, but that was a small consolation.

7. THE FUGITIVE

THE MUZZLE OF THE SHOTGUN moved closer. It touched his cheek coldly before Helm jerked his face away. He called angrily to the crowd, pointed to the shotgun and then to the handle of the briefcase. One of the two leaders snapped an order. The Greek Mafioso moved back a couple of paces but he continued to menace Helm with his weapon.

Helm had been studying the separate group of seven for want of something better to do. He had identified the two leaders as the focus of questions. They made the others shut up when squabbles broke out. They were interchangeable figures in camouflage jackets, jeans and black boots. Try as he might, Helm found that he could pick out nothing in the gloom to help with their identification. The face of his aggressive guard, however, was etched deeply in his memory.

Helm caught the Greek word for bomb. It was one that he knew from personal experience. He wondered if the terrorists thought that the briefcase itself was the bomb. He knew that terrorists the world over have free access to Semtex, a Czech-made plastic explosive that is 147 times more powerful than TNT. A common way of transporting it, according to something that he had seen on TV, is as a lining in a briefcase.

Phileros Makronotis was not the sort of man to take kidnapping lightly. His granddaughter was safe now, and if he blew up one million dollars taking his revenge, he would still have nine hundred and ninety-nine million dollars out of his billion left for emergencies.

Helm knew that he had covered that ground before in his thoughts, but he remained well aware that John Scott had been well paid for taking this risk and he had taken the job with his eyes open. On the other hand, he was supposed to return with information on the kidnappers as there was no guarantee that they were all present or that a briefcase bomb would kill all of those who were there.

It was maddening for Helm to have to sit on his rock, menaced by a shotgun-wielding psychopath and hearing the men with his fate in their

hands communicate mainly with incomprehensible noises. It was almost as if they were doing it deliberately to annoy him. He could catch the odd word, but the men were speaking a filthy Greek patois and his ear wasn't tuned to their dialect. Someone mentioned an X-ray. That seemed to make everything clear.

If the terrorists wanted to examine the case by a non-invasive means to find out exactly what sort of a threat it posed, then Helm would have further chances to learn things about them. He would also be increasing the risk that they would blow him away as a security precaution.

Makronotis' security advisors would have discussed the probability of his survival, in mathematical terms, and they might even have discussed ways to rescue him. Helm wished that he had been there at the time.

He needed to know three things. The first was whether the case contained a bomb, which could be radio-controlled, he realized, and which a distant observer could detonate if the terrorists formed a tight group around him.

The second thing was whether the bomb could be defused so that he could release his desperate grip on the handle of the briefcase. Thirdly, if there was no bomb and it was all just a bluff, he needed to know whether the terrorists would be so please with their million dollars that they would let him go.

Unwilling to take a chance on a wrong decision, Helm could only sit tight and wait for the terrorists to make up their minds about their next move.

One of the leaders kept looking at his watch. The group kept mentioning X-rays, using the English word. With a frustrating sense of doubt, Helm imagined them hi-jacking a hospital. He was picking up so little information from the conversation that he knew that he could be jumping to a completely false conclusion on the strength of a couple of words that he knew.

The most sensible way to tackle the problem was to use a small laser to melt a panel out of the liner, through which the money could be removed one bundle at a time. But Helm was reluctant to collaborate with the enemy by offering his brilliant ideas. After all, they had done nothing for him recently – apart from threatening him and trying to rob him.

Suddenly, the group of terrorists split up. Two men dashed away. Moments later, an ancient taxi and a battered Land Rover bumped onto the road from a place of concealment. Helm was granted a divorce from his shotgun sentry. A younger man out of the same box; mid-twenties with hard, dark eyes; shoved a pistol against his ribs and pointed to the taxi.

One of the leaders, not the English-speaker, took the wheel. Everyone

else piled into the Land Rover, which took off at full speed in the direction taken by the Mercedes. It was out of sight almost immediately, but the two vehicles stayed in touch by radio.

Movement shook Helm out of his apathetic trance. He began to compile a truth table. Erlich had told him that he could expect a twenty-second delay between releasing the handle and the briefcase's eruption – fire or explosion. Everything that the German had told him during their brief acquaintance was true, as far as Helm could tell.

On the other hand, Gladwin had led him to believe that the device in the briefcase was just a bluff. Gladwin had told him one lie after another over the past two weeks while using him as a pawn in war games with Erlich.

Erlich had warned Helm not to bale out of the Mercedes with the briefcase. Helm reached cautiously for his door handle. The guard in the back was sitting on his left, holding the gun in his left hand, forearm across his body, cupping his left elbow with his right hand. The muzzle was no longer pointing at Helm. The bumpy road had jolted it off-line.

Helm twitched the briefcase up off his lap, striking the gun barrel, as he pulled the door handle. Explosion! The driver screamed as a bullet crashed through his shoulder. The taxi swerved violently. Helm released his death-grip on the briefcase as the force of inertia threw him against and out of the door. Something sharp hit him on the back of the head as he was landing heavily in a bush. Thorns tore at his face and hands as he rolled through it.

His mental count had reached six when a battering wave of heat and sound flattened him, driving every ounce of breath from his battered body. Erlich had been lying about the twenty seconds. Robert Helm knew that he had just been blown up for the second time in three days.

The taxi was a ball of flames with thick, oily smoke rolling up to the black clouds. Helm trod on something hard as he struggled to his feet. It was the guard's pistol. He found a catch at the base of the handle. The magazine slid out. A slot at the back showed him a dozen or more cartridges in a double column.

Helm worked the slide to eject the cartridge in the chamber. He picked it up, dusted it and stuffed it back onto the magazine. After replacing the magazine in the pistol's handle, he pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked harmlessly. The weapon was safe now for someone who didn't want to be bothered with safety catches.

The pistol was a Beretta – it said so on the badge on the grip, below a design of three circles and three arrows. Helm dropped the weapon into a side pocket of his ruined leather jacket. Thorns had ripped apart the black surface layer, leaving him covered with white stripes, like a negative zebra.

Helm realized suddenly that he could see an awful lot of his surroundings. Someone had pushed back the low hills to reveal more bushes and rocky outcrops. The black clouds were thinning. Sunset lay a further ten minutes in the future and the last gasp of the day was brightening up. Helm remembered that the clouds had blown in from the east coast. If he followed them inland, he would have more room to manoeuvre.

The Land Rover roared back into sight as Helm was moving away from the road. He took a moment to realize that the flashes of light meant that the terrorists were shooting at him. Crouching, he ran for a low hill. With some cover at his back, he veered to the right. He felt like the star of the umpteenth remake of *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. The roar of a shotgun made him dive for cover. This was no way to treat a man with tired blood and waxy lumps.

Helm crouched, breathless and shivering, heart thudding furiously, behind the doubtful protection of a thick bush. He heard another shot – further away. He crawled to another hill and saw the trap.

Half a dozen figures were advancing toward him, well spread out and firing into every suspicious corner. Out in the wilderness, they could make any amount of noise without attracting attention. The Land Rover had circled ahead of him on a rough track. Helm could just make out the driver standing on the roof with a pair of binoculars.

He had a chance of survival if he could dodge the gang until it was too dark to be seen. Someone might even report a mysterious pillar of black smoke to the police, but he couldn't count on that. The kidnapers would have chosen an area well away from dwellings with telephones. Erlich had been guided into the area by radio. Helm remembered seeing a wire to his earphone rising from the front passenger seat.

Helm's orders were to stay put when he was released and wait to be picked up by the Makronotis organization. The end of its transmissions would have told Erlich that his bug had been found. A column of black smoke in the sky would tell him that 'Scottie' was history along with the money and some of the kidnapers. Anyone sent to investigate would be in no hurry to witness the horror of a collection of bits of bodies. Helm had personal experience of just how stomach-churning that treat could be. His salvation, if there was to be one, was in his own hands now.

He continued to move to his right, scuttling in a crouch along gullies, crawling when he thought that he might be exposed to either the man on the Land Rover or the line of hunters. He was glad that it was summer. Sweat was pouring off him in the dying heat of the day but the bushes were thick with leaves and they gave him abundant cover.

He came to a rocky area – an outcrop of weathered edges thrust up by some ancient act of geological violence. Helm glanced at his watch as he decided how best to proceed. He had been on the run for twenty minutes and his clothing showed it. The elbows and forearms of his leather jacket were a mess of scuffed shreds with ground-in dust. He had worn right through the right knee of a brand new pair of jeans. The left knee was just white threads. Dust stuck to his clothes and sweating body gave him a natural camouflage.

The sun had set. More black clouds were blowing in from the Aegean Sea. He would become more difficult to spot in the darkness. Staying in that area much longer was becoming increasingly dangerous for a bunch of the terrorist kidnappers, however. Helm had turned that into an article of faith. He was expecting them to race away in their Land Rover at any second.

Resting was a seductive luxury. Helm had burned up an enormous amount of nervous energy during his flight and his blood was having to work nearly twice as hard to supply his tissues with oxygen. His nose and mouth felt clogged with dust. He kept having to cough into his handkerchief to deaden the sound and the mint imperials were turning his mouth into a sticky mess. He had learned that fear cripples the hunted.

In theory, there were too few hunters to cover such a vast search area. All that they had been able to do was fan out from the burning taxi. In theory, Helm could find somewhere to hide and let the hunt pass over him.

The distant roar of a shotgun made that plan seem suicidal. If the terrorists were shooting at random, they were sure to hit someone with Robert Helm's rotten luck. After all, he was the idiot who had turned up for a meeting at a café that these same terrorists had selected for demolition.

The roar and an impact came simultaneously. Helm gasped with pain and dived forward to circle a slab of rock. His right hand felt numb. He had been hit by a ricochet from a shotgun fired at random. His luck was as bad as ever.

Helm wondered if the rapid movement and his noisy scramble had given away his position. Directed by an inner instinct for survival, he snagged his handkerchief on a rocky spike, then backed into the shelter of a split in a massive boulder. He took the pistol out of his pocket and eased back the hammer to the firing position.

After an eternity, he heard a scuffling sound, then someone singing softly to himself. The hunters, he realized, had no need of silence. They had guns – and clearly, they didn't know that the fugitive was armed too. Acquiring a pistol was a lucky accident, which proved that Helm's

luck wasn't entirely bad. He held his breath as a long, dark tube moved into view on his right, and continued to move past him.

A man in a black sweatshirt and dark trousers went straight to the handkerchief. He took a radio out of his hip pocket. Helm pointed the gun at him and pulled the trigger. There was a loud click. The terrorist stiffened. Helm gave himself up for lost.

As the terrorist began to turn, Helm remembered that he had to work the slide to load the pistol. Everything seemed to be happening in dream-like, treacle-bound, slow motion. The terrorist banged his radio against the shotgun. Helm's first shot went wild. He had missed from three yards! The terrorist realized that he had to drop the radio to get his finger on the shotgun's trigger. Helm's second shot hit him in the face. The shotgun fired straight up into the air.

Helm fired twice more, hitting the man in the chest. He flopped straight back. As the radio squawked excitedly, Helm advanced on the still figure, pistol extended, finger ready on the trigger. The man was lying on his back with his mouth and eyes open. He had a raw, red spot beside his nose. Helm just stood and stared down at him. It was the psychopath, who had taken such delight in shoving his shotgun into a prisoner's face at the rendezvous.

Helm had seen TV cop shows by the thousand. He had seen police officers portrayed as emotionally destroyed after having to kill an armed and dangerous criminal. Helm could feel glad only that a thug was dead and proud that he had done away with him. He had wanted to take the shotgun off the man earlier so that he could hit him with it. He was delighted to have taught him an even more lasting lesson less than an hour later.

The radio was still squawking. Helm heard the Land Rover's engine start. Keeping the terrorist in view – he wasn't entirely sure that the man was dead yet – he worked his way round the rocks until he could see the vehicle. The rest of the gang were making their way to the track by their most direct route.

The Land Rover moved off, picking up men as they reached the track. It disappeared into distant gloom, showing no lights. Helm dropped the shotgun into a crack in the rocks and retrieved his scruffy handkerchief. He was sure that the terrorist was dead now. No one could keep his eyes open for so long without blinking.

Helm dragged the body to the edge of a slope and rolled it out of sight among the bushes. When he had been through the performance of making his self-loading pistol safe by returning the cartridge in the chamber to the magazine, he crawled to a rise in the rocks.

The taxi was still smoking but the main fire had burned itself out. There was a Jeep-clone with a high roll-bar on the road, about twenty

yards from the wreck. As he watched, a similar vehicle arrived. Helm set off in the opposite direction from the road.

If the new arrivals were cops, he had no wish to answer their questions – not with a body in the shrubbery and a recently fired pistol in his pocket. If Herr Erlich had turned up to view the after-effects of his bomb, Helm felt uneasy about asking him for a lift. He was afraid that Erlich would take the opportunity to dispose of someone who had lost a million dollars and who knew too much.

Civilization had barely touched the wilderness in the triangle bounded by Athens, Marathon in the north and Rafina on the east coast. Its main feature was a mountain over 3,500 feet high. Helm had no idea where he was in relation to Athens, but he was bound to reach a major road eventually if he headed west. He could remember that much from the road map supplied with the car for his first job – which had also gone up in flames, he recalled.

As long as he could see the clouds moving overhead, he knew where west lay – unless the wind had shifted. He found a rocky track that seemed to lead in the right direction. When lightning carved a luminous path down to too-close hills and thunder shook the air around him, he began to look for shelter. He wasn't used to such emptiness.

Robert Helm was a confirmed townie. He kept expecting to see the lights of the odd cottage, or moving headlights that would guide him to a road. Buying a lift to civilization was no problem for someone who could hand out fifty-dollar traveller's cheques. But finding someone to take them was.

He spotted a distant glow as the rain started. It was like standing under a hosepipe. He was soaked from head to toe in seconds. Shivering and thoroughly miserable, he made for the beacon. It went out when he was fifty yards away.

Helm continued to walk in what he hoped was the right direction with his arms extended, wrists crossed in front of his face to intercept any branches and sliding his feet to avoid falling into any more hollows or tripping over more rocks.

He walked into a stone wall, jarring his left wrist. Unhelpful lightning lit the sky a couple of seconds too late. He felt his way round to a doorway, guided, when he turned a corner, by a yellow glow at the bottom of the door.

An ancient man with a shaggy, white beard and a ragged pullover responded to a stranger pounding on his door. Helm stood there in the lamplight, looking soggy and pathetic. The old man waved him over to the bright blaze of a wood fire and slammed his door on a dismal night. Helm began to steam.

"I got lost," he said, hoping that his host understood English. If not,

he would have to try his patchy Greek.

"English?" The old man had a creaky voice.

"Irish." Helm remained in character. "But I've always live in England. Good job I found you."

They had to raise their voices to compete with the rain, which sounded as if it was coming down with enough force to wash away solid rock.

"Tourist?" the old man looked doubtfully at the wreck of Helm's expensive leather jacket and his jeans. Even wet through, which makes everyone look distressed, it was obvious that Helm had done some hard travelling.

"Have you ever heard of Phileros Makronotis?" Helm decided that he had nothing to lose by telling part of the truth to some old tramp out in the wilds.

The old man laughed. "What do you English say? That is a silly question."

"Well, I was doing a job for him. I don't know if you heard an explosion and some shooting earlier? Some terrorists kidnapped his granddaughter. I paid them the ransom, then things got a bit hairy."

"Which granddaughter?"

"I don't know her name. About ten, with red hair and she has her hair in a pony-tail. She treated the whole thing like a game."

"Sophia. His favourite."

The old man turned to a cupboard. Helm noticed that the rain had either slackened or stopped. It was no longer drumming on the roof. The old man offered him a blanket. It smelled a bit ripe but Helm could hardly afford to be choosy.

He spread his wet clothes in front of the fire and stuffed his shoes with old newspaper from the pile used for lighting the fire. He had difficulty in believing that the old man's hut lay on a regular paper round.

Wearing the blanket like a sarong, he turned his attention to the contents of his pockets. His wallet was damp on the outside because rain had soaked down his sweatshirt to the lining of his leather jacket.

The old man handed him a piece of towel to dry the wallet and the plastic cases for his traveller's cheques and his passport. Helm gave his host the simple pleasure of holding the traveller's cheques in front of the fire to dry them.

The rest of his possessions could stand a soaking – a comb, keys, loose change and his mirror sunglasses. The old man bumped against the leather jacket as he moved away from the fire with the dry traveller's cheques. He looked thoughtfully at Helm as he weighed the heavy pocket in his hand.

"A gun," said Helm. "From one of the kidnappers. It probably needs drying too. And cleaning."

The old man dipped into the pocket. "Beretta. A new one. Mark ninety-two. I had a Mark thirty-four in the war."

"You can have it, if you want."

"Yes?" The old man looked surprised. Then he stuck out a wrinkled hand. "Demosthenes Taxacaris."

"John Scott." Helm shook the hand, then turned away to sneeze wetly into the fire.

Txacaris produced a bottle of cheap brandy and poured into two mugs. "Cheers, old boy."

They drank a toast to each other. Then the bottle was empty. Taxacaris looked at it regretfully, then he screwed the cap on and deposited it in a corner with other empties. He had his own, personal bottle bank.

"Pity there's not a shop nearby where we can get another," said Helm.

"I have some ouzo."

"I'm not too keen on that." Helm considered the Greek national drink a poor cousin of *Pernod*.

"The village is just three miles," said Taxacaris. "If I had money."

"I only got here this afternoon. Pity I didn't get a chance to cash any of my traveller's cheques." Helm had 6,000 drachmas, but the notes were in his blue, zip-up jacket back at the villa.

"My friend in the village will cash them."

"Will he? Will the shops be open? It's after nine."

"When there is money," Taxacaris said wisely, "they are open. You need clothes and food. And a toothbrush."

"What about getting there, though? Three miles in the dark and the rain is no joke."

"I have motorbike. B.S.A. From the war."

"World War Two?" said Helm incredulously. "You mean it still runs?"

"I was mechanic then," Taxacaris told him with modest pride.

He opened a cupboard to reveal a plastic over-suit and an old leather helmet with goggles attached. Helm signed two fifty-dollar traveller's cheques. It was Makronotis' money and he could afford to be generous. Then he made a list of his sizes, using the international conversion tables in his diary. He needed a pair of jeans and a waterproof jacket of some sort. The rest would be all right when it dried.

Txacaris wrapped the pistol in a piece of cloth and put it away in a cupboard. Helm spotted a portable radio as the old man was changing into his motor-cycling gear.

"Does this work?" Helm tried the on-switch.

"Dead batteries," said Taxacaris. "You want to hear the wireless?"

"I'd like to hear the news. The BBC news."

“Old wireless. Maybe new one would work better.”

Helm signed another fifty-dollar traveller's cheque. It was only money. He felt rather guilty about sending a pensioner into a filthy night on a motorbike but the old man seemed happy enough about what he was doing and only he knew the way to the village. His motorbike sounded healthy enough as it pattered away from the hut.

Helm took stock of his surroundings. He was in a one-room hut with walls of local stone and a wooden ceiling. It had the great advantage that no one would ever think of looking for him there. The floor was dressed stone slabs – a real craftsman's job, with each slab fitted exactly to its neighbour. There were neat curtains of blue denim at the windows. His beacon earlier had been the old man moving a curtain aside to look out at the rain.

An oil lamp, looking like a prop from a Western film, hung from three chains attached to hooks in the ceiling. Combined with the fire, it created a warm, friendly atmosphere. There was a shepherd's crook beside the door and a dog had looked at him suspiciously from its box in a corner before going back to sleep.

There was a two-tier bunk against the wall opposite the window. The room looked very tidy. Helm assumed that everything had its place in one of the cupboards to create as much room to move as possible. Two wooden chairs were tucked under the table at the right-hand window. Helm could see no signs of another occupant.

He felt better when he had put on his dried clothing. Robert Helm had not been brought up to feel at home wearing nothing but someone else's blanket. His jeans would look all right with two large patches on the knees but the leather jacket was a write-off. Helm felt the loss keenly.

He had started to save for the jacket from his first salary payment. A large piece of his self-image had gone with the jacket. It was a good quality garment and he had kept it looking like new. The jacket announced that the wearer had good taste and high standards – no more after a crawl through the Greek countryside with terrorists chasing him and death at his ragged elbows.

Demosthenes Taxacaris stopped his motorbike at the door while Helm was still brooding about his jacket. He had two cartons, which were wrapped in polythene sheet and perched on the pillion. One contained clothes, the other stock for a small pub. Helm found all sorts of odds and sods as he unpacked the clothes. The new radio was wrapped in a dark blue, nylon anorak, which looked sturdy and waterproof, and proved to be a good fit. The jeans were all right when Helm had created six-inch turn-ups.

He found a packet of toothbrushes and a tube of toothpaste at the

bottom of the carton, a pack of disposable razors, a camping knife, fork and spoon set, two china mugs with pictures of the Parthenon, antiseptic cream, cotton gauze and surgical tape for his scratches, and two glass tumblers.

Taxacaris made a concoction of chopped onions, tomatoes, mushrooms and tinned corned beef, bound together with beaten egg and seasoned liberally with his supply of fresh herbs. Helm drank two-thirds of a bottle of red wine. The old man helped him out with the rest when he had finished his own bottle.

A large meal, the wine and the exhaustion of fleeing for his life caught up with Helm while the coffee was brewing. He brushed his teeth and retired to the top bunk, leaving the old man sampling his bottle of *Courvoisier*. Demo Taxacaris had expensive tastes in brandy when someone else was buying.

It was bright morning when Helm opened his eyes again. There was no sign of the old man or his dog. The new radio was hanging on a nail at the head of his bunk. Helm switched on and tuned in to the BBC World Service. The announcer was working through some sports reports. Then someone began to play an acoustic guitar.

Helm dressed slowly, feeling stiff and sore. He had been asleep for eleven hours but he still felt tired. The feeling would pass. Anaemia had made him a slow starter. He found a sink that he hadn't noticed the night before. He washed and shaved in what felt like icy spring-water.

The fire was out but his host had a bottled-gas stove. Helm made some coffee, hoping that boiling would kill any bugs in the water, and fried two eggs, refusing to think about salmonella. He ate the eggs with chunks of unbuttered bread, feeling quite proud of his ability to rough it.

He was finishing his coffee when the international news round-up got round to Greece. The police had found the bodies of two terrorists in a burnt-out car twenty kilometres from Athens. Weapons found in the wreck, and the driving licence of an Irish tourist found nearby, had set the police on the trail of a connection between the IRA and the current plague of Arab bombers.

Helm dived for his wallet. John Scott's driving licence had gone. Some light-fingered bandit had lifted it the previous evening and then discarded it before beginning the hunt for its owner. Throwing away a document that belonged to a doomed man made a lot of sense. The bandit's prudence had put Helm into serious trouble, however.

He had no confidence in the Greek police. They would throw him into a tiny, dank cell with about four dozen other unfortunates, if the experience of other arrested Britons was general. They might teach a

violent lesson to someone who had sneaked into their country on a false passport to spread madness and mayhem.

He couldn't rely on Phileros Makronotis for help now. Helm had lost one of his millions and he had accounted for just three of eight known kidnappers. Rather than admit that he had paid a ransom to terrorists, the billionaire was liable to deny everything and leave Helm to save himself.

If he died in gaol, Robert Helm would never enjoy his £75,000. The alternative to surrendering to depression was to think of a way of fighting back. Unfortunately, good ideas weren't exactly queuing up to be heard.

8. SECRET SESSION

HELM SWITCHED THE RADIO on and poured some *Courvoisier* into his Parthenon mug. He remembered that he hadn't received any change from his \$150 of traveller's cheques but his host had seen the rest of the book. Betrayal was unlikely until the old man had extracted them, signed, from the fugitive. Helm wondered what had happened to the gun. Parting with it so readily seemed a mistake now – yet he knew that he would not use it to evade arrest. Shooting a psychopath who had been trying to kill him was one thing. Cold-blooded murder was quite another.

He could always shoot to wound, or just use the weapon for intimidation, however. Helm reminded himself that the terminal condition of his adverts remained a real possibility. He didn't feel ill, just sick at heart at the amount of trouble that he was in, but he had no idea what insidious forces were at work inside his body.

He was a wanted man in Greece. If the Greeks threw him in gaol for even a couple of months, he might be losing a large chunk of the rest of his life. Worse, he might lose the chance to receive life-saving treatment. If there was nothing wrong with him, he could afford to wait to clear his name.

If the worst was true, he was entitled to make strenuous efforts to get away – at least as far as £250 and \$200 in traveller's cheques would take him.

Above all, he had to force himself to take a wartime fighter pilot's attitude to his problems – concentrate fully on getting through today, don't waste time worrying about tomorrow and don't even *think* about the day after.

Searching the hut was a quick operation. There were just four cupboards. He found the pistol in a tin box, along with several medals and a selection of badges of both British and German regiments. Helm felt a little better with a couple of pounds of Italian-made intimidation dragging at his anorak.

The motorbike chugged back a few minutes later. Taxacaris had two jerrycans of petrol strapped to panniers on either side of the rear wheel, and another carton strapped to the pillion seat. His dog watched the unloading operation from the shade of a bush ten yards from the hut before closing his eyes again. It was a hot morning. The temperature seemed to be heading for the thirties again.

Enough rain to turn an average English moorland into a swamp had just vanished. The vegetation seemed a little greener but the wasteland looked as dusty and as thirsty as ever. Helm could see a mountain beyond a low hill behind the hut. That direction was north. He wondered if he would talk the old man into taking a seventy- or eighty-mile round trip beyond the mountain to give him a ride to Corinth.

Demosthenes Taxacaris had trimmed his white beard. He looked quite smart in a new, emerald green, cotton jacket over a red-tartan lumberjack shirt. He had bought four litres of mineral water for his guest. He presented Helm with an Olympic Airways flight bag containing a facecloth, two towels, a bar of green soap in a plastic box, a blue plastic comb and the shaving cream that he had forgotten to buy the night before.

"You have listened to the radio?" He looked at the heavy pocket of Helm's new anorak. It was hardly the weather for wearing such a garment, even in the relative cool of the hut.

"If you think I'm a danger to you, I'll go," said Helm.

"I have seen many dangerous men." Taxacaris put on a wise smile to tell Helm that *he* looked harmless enough. "And I have seen English soldiers on the run from Germans. I will make coffee. Tell me your story."

Helm shed his anorak and put it on his bunk. Three white marble figures on a nearby shelf unit caught his eye. They were a foot high and they had suffered some superficial damage, but it failed to detract from their obviously superb workmanship.

Txacaris added cognac to the mugs of coffee. Helm took the chairs outside and completed an outline of the events of the past fortnight. He was more definite about his lack of future than he felt. The story made more sense if he was taking risks so that he could go out with a bang, and he had realized the night before that having £75,000 meant that he could spend £1,000 a week for eighteen months, or £2,000 a week for nine, or £5,000 a week for about three months. That was worth fighting for with any allies available.

When Helm got to his arrival at the hut the previous night, Taxacaris nodded. "Yes, that is what he would do. If his granddaughter was safe, he would not care about the money. Can you imagine a man who does not care about a million dollars?"

"To be honest, no," said Helm. "Did you say you know him last night?"

"When I was young, I worked for his father."

"I thought he was an orphan? Adopted by a shepherd? I had that from his foster-father at the villa. Ianos."

"Old Ianos is his uncle, his mother's brother," chuckled Taxacaris. "The Germans shot his father at the end of the war. For stealing from them. His mother married a ferry captain about ten years later. She died on Santorini nine or ten years ago."

"So he didn't really become an orphan until he was about fifty? That's a big difference. I suppose all that guff about finding the statues is hot air too?"

"Philo found them because he knew where to look. His father had a workshop to make them for Nazi officers. They supplied the marble, six of us did the carving. I am the last of them and I am seventy-nine years old. When I die, his secret is safe."

"Did all the others die naturally?"

"Philo has his own code of honour. We helped to make his fortune - he does not want our blood on his hands."

"Does his code extend to giving you a pension?"

"He pays well for my work. Small statues to give to business friends without giving away our country's treasures."

"Like the ones on the shelf inside?"

"I live here in the summer, making statues in my workshop. I live in a nice apartment in Athens in winter. I enjoy the comfort of the city but I also enjoy the peace of the country."

"I thought you were a shepherd at first. Not that I've seen many sheep around here."

"My workshop is nearby," said Taxacaris.

Helm followed him twenty yards to a wooden door in an outcrop of rock. There was a roomy, natural cave beyond the door. To Helm's surprise, the old man started a generator. Neon strips glowed.

Taxacaris had a sturdy wooden bench and a rack of hammers and stone-working tools. The floor was white with marble dust. Blocks sawn into neat oblongs, a foot high and six inches square, were stacked against the end wall. The motorbike stood beside them.

"I made much bigger statues in the old days," said Taxacaris. "Two metres tall and bigger."

Helm lifted a completed statuette carefully. "I see this one's perfect. Doesn't it hurt you, having to knock bits off them, like those ones in your house?"

"They did not turn out well. My friend in the village buries them then sells them to tourists. I only sell work I am proud of to Philo."

"What about the Roman remains he found in the cave with the statues?"

Taxacaris shrugged. "The Nazis took what they liked in Italy. And Philo's family has always been good at mixing real and false. And good at buying the best advice. He put the money from the statues into stocks and shares, and then he made a lot more out of tankers before the Arabs raised the price of oil. By then, he had so much money he could not help making more. He also deals in works of art now.

"He also buys back the original statues, the fakes. He calls it returning national treasures to our homeland. Taking away the black shadows from his past and from the Nazis who bought them. It is his code of honour. He could say he knows now the statues are fakes and he could buy them back at a fair price, but he does not want to admit he could be dishonest – even when he was a young man. And some of the Nazis give them back so that their past will not be known."

"So he doesn't claim your small statues are antiquities?" To his surprise, Helm had found the initials 'ΔΤ' and a date of completion carved into the base of the statuette.

"Many are copies of well-known statues as they would be without lost limbs or no head. They are genuine modern works of art. Philo is very careful with his reputation in the art world. There must be no scandal."

"So he's a self-made man, who keeps polishing his image?"

"One of his sons is the Minister of Fisheries. If he is to become prime minister, there must be no scandal in his family."

"Even after you had a prime minister who dragged his mistress to England when he had heart surgery?"

"Not in the Makronotis family."

"So how do you get away with telling me all this?"

"Knowing is one thing," Taxacaris said wisely. "Proving is another."

"I suppose so," Helm admitted. "I hope you don't think I'm being rude, but your English seems to be getting better by the hour. I noticed a crook by the door. Do you pretend to be a simple shepherd until you know someone?"

"Maybe," grinned Taxacaris. "I also need practice. In winter, when I live in Athens, I have two neighbours. Both old, both English. We sit, we drink, we talk. The ladies are too old to do anything else. Here, I talk to my dog and he only speaks Greek."

A helicopter zoomed past some distance away, flying low but travelling rapidly toward the mountain. Helm went to the door of the cave to watch it duck below a belt of hills.

"They were out early this morning," said Taxacaris.

"I wonder if they found anything?" Helm was thinking of the man whom he had shot and rolled into the bushes.

"We should ask our friend Philo. The police will not say anything but he will know."

"They're not likely to drop in on you? The police?"

"I am difficult to find, either on the ground or from the air. You were very lucky to see a light last night."

Helm noticed that the flat roof of the stone hut was covered with a layer of gravel and stones, some of them quite large, with grass and bits of bush sprouting to make the stone mouth of the chimney look like just another part of the artificial landscape. He realized that colliding with the hut could be the only way of finding it at night.

Helm took the mugs back to the hut to wash them. He left Taxacaris eyeing a part-finished, foot-high goddess and selecting an appropriate chisel for working on her face. The old man kept his perishables in unglazed, earthenware pots, which he stood in bowls of water. Evaporation from the porous surface kept the contents cool and fresh. Helm had put a bottle of mineral water in a long, thin pot.

He washed the mugs at the sink and rinsed his own with mineral water before filling it from the cooled bottle to take an edge off a powerful thirst. The only thing wrong with roughing it in foreign parts, he decided, was the endless precautions against picking up foreign bugs. He remembered hearing a presenter of a travel programme advising viewers to take Milton sterilizing fluid abroad to wash salad ingredients.

Another traveller on an earlier programme had infected himself quite deliberately with a tape-worm to test a theory that they protect their host against digestive upsets. The traveller had eaten local foods and drunk the water in some remote parts of the world and his tape-worm had kept him feeling well, even if he had been forced to eat half as much again as normal to keep the parasite happy. It wasn't an idea that Robert Helm fancied trying.

He refilled his mug with mineral water, mopped sweat from his face and armpits with a towel, and went out to the chairs in the shade of the roof's overhang. An impossibly bright sun in a cloudless sky had preserved one of his footprints in the site of an overnight puddle. Mud had become as hard as brick. If it turned to mudstone, Helm told himself, it would be something for a fossilologist to ponder over in about fifty million years.

He had polished his shoes after chipping mud off them and brushing away a film of white salt. A routine task helped to put him back in touch with reality. He looked completely out of place with polished shoes and brand new jeans. He was a town person. His last sojourn in the country had been a caravan holiday with Steph and his parents at the age of thirteen.

Since then, living rough had meant sleeping in an armchair after a party with unbrushed teeth and a mellow, alcoholic glow. He had always known that he could get by in more primitive circumstances, though. He could get by anywhere until the money ran out.

Here, in polished shoes and jeans with beautifully sharp creases, he was like the irrepressible English gentleman, who insists on dressing for dinner when he is about to be eaten by cannibals.

All he had to do now was think of some way to get home to his £75,000. He was more or less at the stage where Dr. Bennett's further tests had become unimportant. Properly invested, he had enough to allow him to retire from the working population at about fifty and live quite comfortably. Or, if the final news was bad, he could blow the lot on a very decent world cruise and jump off the blunt end on the day before the liner was due to dock again at its British port.

He had the equivalent of about £400 on him. If the old man would give him a lift to Corinth on his motorbike, he would be able to get to Corfu on ferries for less than £20. Allowing £100 as a bribe to a Greek fisherman for a ride across to the heel of Italy, he would be able to put his emergency plan into operation – if he could sneak ashore at some quiet spot.

He would travel to Rome by train, tell the British embassy that Robert Helm's passport and most of his luggage had been stolen, and continue home on the train via France with a temporary travel document. His name wouldn't appear on any passenger lists if he didn't fly. He would arrive home without ceremony. His first job, once safely out of sight, would have to be destroying his 'stolen' UK passport. When he was out of Greece, he would place a major gap in the chain between himself and the IRA suspect John Albert Scott.

The helicopter returned, scattering his thoughts.

The noise approached from behind the hut. Helm rushed inside, taking one of the chairs with him and feeling pleased with his forethought. An old man living alone wouldn't have two chairs in front of his hut. The helicopter passed overhead, then circled back. Helm stayed indoors, refusing to show any curiosity. The engine sound remained constant for a while, somewhere behind the fireplace wall. Then it began to circle again. The door of the hut opened while Helm was looking toward the bunks.

"So you are alive?" said a voice with a Greek-American accent. "Lane said you'd be here. What happened to your face?"

"Bushes." Helm recognized his old pal Alex, who had dropped his half of a dead donkey in Helm's path to 'rescue' him from gun-toting Tsai.

The sight of his black, soup-strainer moustache was somewhat more

welcome than seeing a police uniform, but there was very little in it.

"We never got to Athens on Tuesday," Alex added.

"Was that really just the day before yesterday?" said Helm. So much had happened to him that it felt like a week since their last meeting. "How did you find me?"

"Local knowledge," grinned Alex. "Like why would an old coot with a beard want disposable razors? Or a pair of jeans a couple of sizes too big for him? And where did he get John Scott's traveller's cheques?"

"Nothing happens to him, okay?" Helm said with more determination than he felt.

"Yeah, the old guy's cool. Are you going to get packed?" Alex hooked his thumbs under blue braces. He was wearing a white linen jacket with a bulge under the left arm.

Helm managed to shake the pistol out of his anorak pocket as he was folding it to stow it in his flight bag. He moved the pistol under a tuck in the blanket on his bunk. He had no further use for it and he had given it to his host anyway. Yani, the younger member of Lane's private army, was standing at the mouth of the cave with Taxacaris. The old man was holding two bottles of *Courvoisier*.

"Something for his memory," said Alex. "Okay, stop here," he added a few yards from the cave. "I want to search you."

Helm felt glad that he had disposed of the pistol. Being unarmed made him harmless. Alex patted him down and rooted through the flight bag. He found nothing to tell him that he was dealing with a man who had killed three times the previous day – twice by letting go of the handle of a briefcase that contained a bomb instead of an incendiary device, and a third time by intent.

Helm felt that he had an edge for use in an emergency. At the same time, he hoped that there would be no need to take further emergency action. He had taken more than enough risks for one lifetime. He had money to spend and he wanted to live to spend it.

Demosthenes Taxacaris wished him good luck with a conspiratorial smile. Helm winked and murmured that he had left him a present in his bunk. Alex and Yani were waving the helicopter down to a flat hill-top. A few minutes later, it deposited the passengers at a Jeep parked on a side road. The back of the Jeep was full of empty cartons, which were stapled together to form a hiding place.

"You ride into the city in here," Alex told Helm. "Unless you want to talk to the cops?"

"No, thanks." Helm made himself as comfortable as possible.

"What happened to the millions bucks?" said Yani.

"It got turned into confetti," said Helm.

"All of it?" said Alex indignantly.

"There was this bomb in the case," said Helm. "And you didn't find any when you searched me, did you?"

"A million bucks up in smoke," said Yani regretfully.

"Cheer up, it wasn't *your* million bucks," Helm said as the shell of cartons closed over him.

The ride into Athens was dark, hot and full of collisions with sharp edges. The Jeep stopped eventually in a dirty alley. Helm dashed past a guard of dustbins and through a dark blue door. He found himself in the steamy confines of a busy kitchen. Alex led him to a set of double doors. Helm worked out that the Greek word on the right-hand door was pronounced 'exodos', which needed no translation.

He found himself in the subdued red, orange and green lighting of a club, which seemed well-filled for ten past ten on a Thursday morning. A well-built woman wearing glitter and a boa constrictor was writhing on the small stage.

Helm had to take a second look into a booth on the side wall, a few yards from the doors to the kitchen. Roger Gladwin had disguised himself by taking off his dark green cap. He was as bald as Helm had suspected. A horseshoe shape of grizzled hair was topped by a naked dome of the same colour as his tanned face, which proved that his cap wasn't an almost permanent fixture.

"Claret?" said Helm, drawing his conclusion from the shape of the bottle in front of Gladwin. The dim red light made the label illegible.

"You don't have to drink the local brew all the time." Gladwin filled the other glass. "Tell me about yesterday. From when you and Erlich drove off with a million bucks. Leave nothing out, no matter how trivial."

Helm unclogged his throat with red wine, then he gave a fairly full account of his movements up to his arrival at Demosthenes Taxacaris' summer retreat. He held in reserve the secrets shared with the old man.

"So there were eight of them?" said Gladwin. "And you saw faces?"

"Only of the ones who are dead now. I saw the rest from a distance in terrible light. I wouldn't know the rest again if they were sitting next to you. Did the police manage to identify the ones in the taxi?"

"No chance. They were barbequed. All they could say for sure is they'd had all their dental work done here. You say they were all Greeks? No Arabs?"

"As I said, I didn't get much of a look at most of them, but they were all speaking Greek, not Arabic. And before you ask, no, I don't speak Arabic but I do know Greek when I hear it. And that's what I heard."

"Okay, we'll get an artist to knock out some sketches of the two you wrote off with the taxi. How close did they look at the cash?"

Helm frowned. "One of them looked at all of it. Why?"

"Yes, but how close? Did he take notes out of the bundles to look at the watermark, for instance?"

"No, there was so much of it. He just flicked through each of the bundles to make sure they were all hundred dollar bills and you'd not padded it out with newspaper. And I don't think they wanted to hang around. Why?"

"Wouldn't it be nice for someone if high-class forgeries went up in smoke, leaving him with a million bucks that don't have to be accounted for?"

"Someone like who?" frowned Helm.

"Who gave you the cash?"

"You mean Erlich switched it?"

Gladwin shrugged. "Stranger things have happened at sea."

"He'd pull that with Makronotis in personal charge of everything?"

Gladwin shrugged again. "He didn't check the cash personally. He's the boss and that's a job for the help. And who can prove what was in the briefcase now? And anyway, the boss is too busy celebrating getting his girls back to worry about a little lost cash."

"Did he fire the maid on the spot?"

"Dead right! She cost him a million bucks."

"But he was happy to get Tsai back too? There's not something going on there? Special agent and the boss?"

"You don't know, do you?" chuckled Gladwin. "She's his daughter. He had an affair with her mother in Paris when he was on the way up. The mother died about eight years ago, and she never told the kid who her father is. The boss had to give her a job. She's on Kaiser's team."

"Yes, she told me. You reckon she knows who her dad is?"

"Probably. She's a smart cookie. Not to mention a bit of an embarrassment to the boss-man. Any bastard daughter has to be a source of scandal. But he's got his code of honour, and giving the kid a job shows his heart's in the right place if any bugger tries to use it against him."

"More image-polishing. So what happens now?"

"Now, we stash you somewhere. While the cops think you're the IRA." Gladwin grinned at Helm. Then he nodded toward the stage. "Fancy that, do you? Need some company?"

The snake lady had finished her act. Helm had been watching a singer in a revealing dress because there was something odd about her. "So you reckon you could fix it?"

"The manager's a mate of mine," said Gladwin.

"Pity I'm not into female impersonators," Helm guessed.

"In that case, it's back in the boxes," said Gladwin.

Helm drained his glass and made his way back through the kitchen to the alley. There was no sign of Alex or Yani. He had a feeling that

Gladwin had hoped to play an adult joke on him – such as getting him into a compromising position with a female impersonator before the truth dawned.

Gladwin's reaction seemed to confirm his conclusion about the singer. Another round of shadow boxing was over but Helm had no idea of the outcome. As ever, he had been told a whole load of trivia but less than half of the real story.

Gladwin arrived to take the wheel. The Jeep turned half a dozen corners. Helm escaped from his shell of cartons again. Gladwin used a key to open a battered door. He led the way along a corridor to a staircase. Helm followed him along a first-floor corridor of closed doors.

He realized that he was in a cheap hotel, judging the price range from the frayed carpet and the grubby marks on the walls. He followed Gladwin up two more flights of the main staircase, circling round a lift in an ornamental cage. Gladwin unlocked a door at the end of the third-floor corridor and tossed the key onto the single bed.

"Lock your door. Erlich will be in touch when he's ready. Tell him you were brought straight here and you don't know who did the bringing. Okay?"

"More security games?" Helm said cynically.

Gladwin looked into the small, connecting bathroom and the ancient wardrobe. "The password is *Archimedes*, got it?"

"Yo! When will Erlich be here?"

"When he's ready."

"What about food?" Helm knew from past experience that the security advisors could take several days to become ready.

"Call the desk, give the password, then your order. Don't go out. It's not safe. The cops have all got guns here. Okay?"

Helm shrugged. "Okay."

He locked the door behind Gladwin, then took a look at the room. It lay at a corner made by the alley and a main road. It had two windows, both with yellowing, net curtains. One opened onto the deck of a fire escape. If he opened both windows, he could create a cooling air flow.

There were rust marks in the sink and the bath, but water flowed freely enough when he turned the taps and the hot water actually steamed. The bed felt comfortable enough, the linen was clean and there were no sharp, projecting springs in the armchair. The television worked, but there was nothing on. He also had a coffee maker with a box of coffee bags and two litres of still mineral water.

There was even some stationery and a ballpoint on a small table. Helm wrestled with the name, then he realized that 'mu' and 'eta' paired at the beginning of a word are pronounced 'b'. He was in the Hotel

Batiris.

Even if the hotel looked as if it let rooms by the hour to familiar women and anonymous men, parts of it were a comfortable hide-out. Helm wondered if the Athens police had the hotel on a list of dodgy dives, and whether they had searched it already for fugitive IRA terrorists. He could believe that they had been warned off by the all-powerful Makronotis organization.

Testing the system, he lifted the telephone receiver and waited for the receptionist to respond. He gave the password and showed off his Greek by asking for a sticky bun. Then he made himself a cup of coffee.

A man in a *Mickey Mouse* T-shirt, fag drooping from the corner of his mouth, delivered his cellophane-wrapped bun. Helm found that he had no Greek change but the waiter seemed happy enough with a British £1 coin.

He had to wait half an hour for further news on the BBC World Service, courtesy of the wall radio. There was nothing about Arab terrorists in Greece or their connection with Irish terrorists. No news was frustrating. He needed someone around like old Taxacaris, who would know where to find a local radio station on the dial, and who could translate what it had to say for the benefit of a foreigner.

Helm left the radio on. He had nothing else for amusement. He ordered a hamburger for lunch, and received an unexpected side order of french fries. He was drinking his third cup of coffee of the afternoon, and listening to the same news for the umpteenth time, when someone knocked on his door.

There were three light taps, then a male voice said, "Archimedes, open up."

Erich had disguised himself with a *Mets* baseball cap and mirror sunglasses. He went over to the front window and looked out at the traffic on the main road for a couple of minutes, ignoring Helm. Then he dropped into the armchair, looking from Helm's cup to the coffee-maker. Helm switched off the radio and started another coffee bag brewing. Erlich began to go through most of Gladwin's questions, placing greater emphasis on the lost money and just how sure Helm could be of identifying the kidnappers.

"Do I get out of here now?" Helm said into a lull in the questioning.

"You're too hot," said Erlich. "We have to wait for things to stop jumping before we can do anything."

"Any chance of something to read? In English? And some Greek cash for tips and things?"

"I'll see what I can do." Erlich parted with coins and notes with the casual unconcern of someone handing out the firm's money – generosity that could be exaggerated when he claimed his expenses. "In

the meantime, stay put. And the guy at the reception speaks good enough English. He reckons your accent is weird when you speak Greek.”

Erlich drained his coffee cup. He waited to hear Helm lock the door before walking to the stairs. Helm switched the radio on again. A quarter of an hour later, someone tapped on his door. Helm assumed that his reading material had arrived. He was desperate for something to fill his empty hours. As he unlocked the door, he tried to recall if he had heard the password. He told himself that he had.

The man on the threshold was holding a long knife, not books or newspapers. Steel flashed brightly when he advanced. He was wearing a happy smile on his tanned, chubby face. He looked like a contented holidaymaker or someone who was about to earn a big bonus.

Robert Helm realized that he was in a lot of trouble again.

9. THE ASSASSIN

THE ROBERT HELM OF four days earlier would have stood no chance against a man with six inches of sharp, polished steel in his fist. Rooted to the spot, he would have stared in disbelief, and remained staring after the blade had emerged from his vitals, its deadly work accomplished. In those four eventful days, Helm had survived two car crashes and two explosions. He had been threatened with a gun three times and he had been shot at by someone trying to kill him rather than intimidate him. He had learned the importance of getting stuck in without delay.

He grabbed the man's wrist and heaved. Helm threw himself backwards to add momentum to the tug. The knifeman shot forward into the room. Helm's feet crashed into the door, slamming it shut. The knifeman turned a somersault, landed on the bed and bounced off it at the other side.

He crashed onto the writing table, demolishing it, and ended up on the floor with the remains of Helm's lunch. As he struggled to his feet, he trod on a styrofoam burger-container that was lubricated with ketchup. His foot shot out from under him. His head met a corner of the bedside cabinet with a dull crunch.

Helm dived at the bed and rolled across it. He landed with both feet on the knifeman's stomach, driving the wind out of him. The knife was nowhere to be seen. Someone started to pound on his door. Helm grabbed his attacker by the collar of his sweatshirt and the belt of his trousers, dragged him to the window and dumped him over the sill onto the fire escape.

He had no clear idea what he was going to do next, but getting out of the hotel with a prisoner to show to Erlich or Gladwin seemed a good idea. The pounding on his door continued as he crammed his few possessions into the flight bag. Then the door flew open. A middle-aged man charged in on a tide of excited Greek.

Helm ignored him when he saw that the intruder was unarmed. He felt annoyed, and frustrated because he didn't know enough Greek to

tell the man to sod off. The intruder rushed to a window to see what all the shouting below was about. Then he turned round and grabbed at Helm's flight bag.

Helm swung a round-house right, which smacked with satisfying force against the intruder's face. He spun away, bounced off a wall and dived, yelling blue murder, into the corridor. A deeper voice joined the uproar. Helm peeped round his door. The intruder had run full tilt into a policeman. They were sprawled on the floor in a tangle of limbs.

The policeman kept a firm grip on his assailant as he struggled to his feet. Protesting loudly, the middle-aged man was marched away with his right arm twisted up his back in a hammer-lock.

Helm waited until they were on the staircase, then slung his flight bag on his shoulder and walked briskly to the lift. A woman in bright green underwear looked round a door on the right of the corridor. She called a question to him. Helm just shrugged expressively, telling her without admitting his deep ignorance of the Greek language that he had no idea what all the racket was about.

The lift was descending. He pressed the call button and got in with a young blonde, who eyed him in a manner that was more professional than friendly. Helm returned an innocent's smile and stood back from the door to let her get out first at the ground floor.

The lobby was full of people, who had crowded in from the street. The policeman and his prisoner were just on their way out. An old woman in black belted the prisoner with her shopping bag as he passed. Helm found himself wondering how she had found the room to take a decent swing.

The receptionist, who had found Helm's Greek accent so amusing, was shouting and waving his arms. Helm bent his head forward and sagged at the knees to lower himself from six feet one to the general height of the mob. Getting out of the lobby was a simple matter of allowing himself to be pushed out onto the street with the mob by the four cops on crowd-control duty.

He realized his mistake when he paused on the other side of the street to adjust his sunglasses. His attacker had fallen thirty feet to cause serious damage to the roof of a car parked in front of the hotel. The fire escape lay outside the room's *other* window. John Scott had claimed his fourth victim in less than twenty-four hours.

Helm tried to freeze a mental image of a face seen for no more than two seconds. He tried to fit it to one of the pale blobs from the night before. The man with the knife *had* to be one of the terrorists, he decided. He hadn't been in the country long enough to get on the wrong side of anyone else.

As he walked, Helm tried to work out how the terrorists had picked

up his trail. They might have followed Roger Gladwin, unlikely as that seemed, or they had spotted Erlich. They might even have known about a Makronotis organization hideout.

The more he thought about it, the more certain he became that the terrorists couldn't have known he was in Athens. They had been supplied with inside information. Someone had told them where to find him – either the general area or his precise location down to the name of the hotel and the room number.

'Don't go out,' Gladwin had told him, 'it's not safe.'

It could hardly be more dangerous than staying indoors, Helm told himself as he counted up his Greek money. Erlich had given him 3,000 drachmas, which sounded a hell of a lot but amounted to about twelve quid in real money.

He paid a thousand drachmas for a cheap, duck-billed cap of dark blue fabric, which had *USS ENTERPRISE* embroidered on it in yellow. Finding out if he was supposed to be a crewman of the aircraft carrier or the starship was beyond his limited Greek.

Wearing dark glasses and a hat wasn't a disguise, it just made him part of the crowd. Helm kept moving on the shaded side of streets, trying to think what to do. A form of internal guidance brought him to familiar territory. He was actually walking around Elousis Square before he realized where he was.

He crossed to the café in the garden centre and ordered a bottle of *Heineken* with reckless disregard for his supply of Greek money. He had so little that it wasn't worth trying to spin it out. As his beer arrived, he spotted one of the Makronotis radiomen. It was just after four-thirty on a boiling hot afternoon.

Five minutes later, a black, hydrogen-powered Mercedes drew up at the Hotel Renga. Phileros Makronotis strolled across the pavement as if he owned it – which he probably did, Helm realized – and disappeared into the air-conditioned building at the end of his day at the stock exchange.

The Mercedes drove away. Helm watched the radiomen winding down, watching for suspicious characters who left as soon as the show was over. Then he saw a radiowoman. She looked about the same size and shape as Tsai but she was some distance away and dark glasses dominated her face.

When he finished his beer, Helm turned his back on the hotel. He wanted a quiet corner nearby with a telephone. He found a suitable café two streets away. Fortunately, the receptionist at the Hotel Renga spoke some English. Helm gave his telephone number in Greek to avoid confusion and asked for it to be passed on to Thespinis Yuan-lin without delay. He said that he was calling in connection with Monday

night's party instead of leaving his name.

Helm was reluctant to throw John Scott's name about while the police were looking for him. Having been blown up on Monday afternoon, just four days earlier, Tsai had to remember who had given her meat balls and red wine in the evening. Helm found her very attractive, the more so because she was the only woman whom he knew in Greece, but he was under no illusion of reciprocation. Even so, Tsai owed him a social obligation of help, even if he was just another security problem.

She had attached herself to him and accepted his hospitality on Monday, and then she had pointed a gun at him without a qualm on Tuesday. She had a perfect corporate conscience, and the boss of the corporation was her father. John Scott had ended up in trouble on the corporation's business and he had information of interest to the boss. He was too valuable to be left hanging.

Tsai was the only member of the Makronotis organization who hadn't lied to him directly. She had deceived him with silence, allowing him to jump to false conclusions, but that was his own fault. Gladwin/Bateman/Lane had told him anything that would make Helm jump in the right direction.

Erlich had lied about the length of the fuse on the bomb in the briefcase. And he was the chief suspect in a possible million-dollar swindle. Tsai was the only one likely to help Helm out of his mess.

Tsai had shared real danger with him twice. She had to be susceptible to emotional blackmail if applied ruthlessly enough, and if he avoided making any threats against her father, Helm told himself. He knew that trusting her basic decency was a risk, but there wasn't much else he could do.

He took a £10 note from his wallet and negotiated for food and change with the café's owner. He beat an initial offer of a straight 2,000 drachmas up to 2,150, which represented a piratical rate of exchange. To a man on the run, it was the best offer available. He bought a Greek-burger, a cup of *American Coffee* and a glass of *Metaxas* brandy to cheer himself up. He took his meal to a table near the telephone.

He finished his first cup of coffee with the burger and bought more coffee to drink with his brandy. A local tour company had sprinkled the café with leaflets. Helm began to read one to pass the time. The English section was disappointingly free of the comical blunders expected of foreigners.

Something hard prodded him between the shoulder blades.

"Freeze!" reached him in a menacing whisper.

Helm dropped his brandy glass, which broke with a crash loud enough to create a moment's silence.

The pressure between his shoulder blades eased.

Tsai dropped onto a chair, wiggled her index finger at him and grinned broadly. "Hello, John. Jumpy?"

"Don't *do* things like that!" Helm transferred pieces of broken glass to an ashtray, taking great care to avoid cutting himself.

"You okay? Face look beat up."

"No bones broken," said Helm bravely.

The owner's wife marched up with a dustpan and brush and a belligerent expression. Tsai said something to her, which made everything all right. The lady seemed rather surprised that Helm had bothered to pick up the larger pieces of his glass. She wasn't used to house-trained customers, especially English-speaking ones.

"I suppose a phone number's as good as an address to your lot," Helm remarked.

"You want to come in from cold, John?" Tsai ignored such an obvious conclusion.

Helm returned a hollow laugh. Tsai's choice of phrase seem ridiculously inappropriate for the thirty-degree heat of an Athenian afternoon. "I want to get away from guys with guns and knives. And the cops, of course. Preferably as far as out of the country."

"Mr. Makronotis want to talk to you."

"Great! I've got a few things to say to him myself."

"Good!" Tsai's bright smile suggested that she expected co-operation rather than complaints. "Wait here. Back soon."

Helm returned his attention to the leaflet, wondering how much of an act Tsai was putting on. Playing the ignorant foreigner with a winning smile, and understanding as much as suited her, were excellent ways of controlling another foreigner, who had got himself into more trouble than he could handle. But just sitting and waiting to be rescued seemed a sensible thing to try for the moment.

Tsai returned in twenty minutes. Helm finished his third cup of coffee. Remembering that drinking spirits in a hot climate is a bad idea, he had decided against more brandy. Tsai wanted him to follow her at a distance. They made their way along crowded streets to a department store. Tsai led him to the menswear department, and paused at one of the changing rooms.

Helm brushed past the curtain. A blue overall was hanging up inside. There was an empty box on the chair. Helm put his Olympic Airways flight bag into the box, then climbed into the overalls. He kept his cap and the sunglasses on. The change of image was dramatic. A hot, sweating tourist had become a hot, sweating workman from the *USS Enterprise*. The overalls were stained artistically and one of the pockets was ripped wide open. Helm told himself to think humble.

Tsai was looking at a rail of jackets. She drifted to the nearest exit

with the workman on an invisible tow-line. The cardboard box was too big to go under his arm and an awkward shape to hold comfortably. It reminded Helm that the Makronotis security staff were merely good, not perfect.

Five minutes after leaving the department store, they entered the Hotel Renga by the staff entrance. They had walked past two uniformed cops on the way. Both had taken a good look at Tsai. Neither had noticed the workman.

The lift stopped at the third floor. Tsai had to wipe a plastic card through a reader to open the doors. The man on duty in the corridor barely glanced at them. Helm assumed that they had been inspected closely by the television camera in the lift.

Tsai led him to room 322. The door was unlocked and there was no key inside. There wasn't even a bolt on the door. Helm dumped his carton on a chair. Tsai gave him a bright smile and abandoned him. Helm found himself alone in a spacious room with a single bed, a television, a writing desk, a coffee machine and plenty of wardrobe space. He occupied two of the hangers with his anorak and the overalls. Then he went to wallow in the bath for a while. Anyone who wanted to talk to John Scott would have to wait until it was convenient for him to speak.

He switched on the radio in the bathroom. There was a programme in French on the BBC World Service. He found an American station playing pop music to servicemen on medium wave. Someone knocked on his outer door after about ten minutes. The door opened. There was another knock on the bathroom door. "Yes?" called Helm.

"Your luggage has arrived, sir." The male voice had a Greek-American accent.

"Right, thanks," called Helm.

"The tailor will be here in five minutes, sir."

"Thank you." Helm took the easy way out by acknowledging the message rather than asking questions through a closed door. He had no idea what the tailor wanted but he could live with his curiosity for five minutes. Being reunited with his cabin bag allowed him to change his underwear. As he dropped the used set into a basket marked 'Laundry' in eight languages, he wondered if he would ever see it again. He had joined the disposable society of the very wealthy – he was a 'use it, then lose it' man now.

The tailor was a fussy man with a German name and a French accent. Helm assumed that he was Swiss. Herr Liebelt shuddered at the oversize turn-ups on Helm's jeans, then he got busy with a tape measure. He went away for ten minutes and returned with a white linen suit and half a dozen shirts. The shirts were mainly white with narrow vertical stripes

of individual pastel colours. Helm assumed that everything was off the peg but the fit satisfied him.

Herr Liebelt took his jacket away for minor alterations, and insisted on having the jeans too so that he could do something with the dreadful turn-ups.

Tsai turned up again as Helm was arranging a pale blue cravat with a crimson unicorn-motif. She looked him up and down then smiled. "Looking good, John."

"You're looking pretty tasty yourself," said Helm.

"Got to look good for boss." Tsai had changed into a bottle-green outfit of blouse and trousers. It looked almost like a uniform. "We go now?"

"If we must."

Tsai took Helm along the corridor to room 310, which was furnished as a small conference room. Phileros Makronotis dominated the room from the head of a polished table, facing his foster-father/uncle. Erlich sat next to Gladwin on the other long side of the table. Despite the disgrace of the kidnapping, the German had not been fired yet. Tsai and Helm took the vacant black-leather chairs. Everyone else had a computer keyboard and a monitor. Helm had to share Tsai's monitor. Erlich was making a report.

"Our original plan was to keep Scott in the field." He glanced at Helm as he completed his summing up. "But things didn't go entirely to plan."

"Too high a profile on writing off that bloke at the hotel," Gladwin added with a sly grin at Helm.

"Am I getting paid for this morning's suicide mission?" Helm said frostily. "Or was it on the house?"

"You were well covered at all times," said Erlich, offering no apology. "You were supposed to go with the opposition's representative and lead us to his colleagues. Your reaction was outside your profile."

"Well, excuse me!" said Helm with heavy sarcasm. "Maybe you should have told me about this famous profile. The way you told me about the bloody H-bomb in that briefcase."

"We believe the fire must have touched off a device they were carrying in their vehicle." Erlich froze his boxer's face in a dangerous expression.

Helm just looked straight at him, his expression saying that he knew a lie when heard one. He glanced at Gladwin, a sideways flick of his eyes. Gladwin rolled his eyes up for a moment. The Englishman told Helm lies more often than the truth but he never wriggled when he was found out.

"This is getting us nowhere," said Phileros Makronotis. "Mr. Scott, we are reviewing what we know about the kidnapping incident and

afterwards. Your contribution is an essential part of the overall picture.”

“We know from Scott’s debriefing that eight men were at the scene of the exchange,” said Erlich, as if a word from the boss had settled all scores. “Two leaders and six subordinates. Miss Yuan-lin and the others never saw more than five masked men at any one time. Scott has accounted for half the known part of the gang already.”

Helm realized that he was being treated as a top gun of the Makronotis assassination squad – purely by accident. His first impulse was to offer an immediate resignation from an unwanted career move. He had no desire to become a target for the rest of the gang of terrorists.

“We now believe no Arab terrorists were involved,” added Erlich. “No identifications were possible on the men burned in the taxi, but the man who attacked Scott this morning has a police record. We haven’t found the man you killed last evening. Do you remember where the body is?”

“I suppose so.” Helm felt rather appalled by the way the German was talking about him killing people. The bomb in the briefcase, Erlich’s bomb, had killed the two men in the taxi, not Robert Helm. As for the defenestration at the Hotel Batiris, it was hardly his fault if he had dumped a prisoner through the wrong window in the heat of battle.

He had killed only one man in the sense of with deliberate intent – the thug with the shotgun, who was on the missing list. And he had made such a hash of shooting the thug that he had nearly got killed himself. He felt comfortable with the deed but not with its execution.

“Mr. Scott?” Phileros Makronotis said indignantly, giving the impression that he had said something and he resented being ignored. “You do remember where the body is?”

“I was just thinking about it,” lied Helm. “I might be able to find the spot if I go out there.”

“Mr. Gladwin will take you out there in a helicopter,” said Makronotis. “When you have seen the artist to give us pictures of the two in the taxi.”

“If there were no Arabs,” said Helm, “what about all the bombs? Like the one that blew us up on Monday?” He glanced at Tsai.

“Camouflage,” said Erlich. “A report from an army bomb expert says the materials were the same as some explosives stolen from a construction site at the beginning of last month. The bombs involved just gelignite, an electrical detonator, a battery and a cheap clock used as a timer.

“They put one connection on the striker and the other on the bell. When the alarm rang, boom! The bombing campaign was designed to make us think we were dealing with more dangerous and ruthless people than local criminals when they carried out the kidnapping.”

“The police think it significant that no Greek nationals were injured,”

said Ianos Makronotis. "Only foreigners."

"I reckon that's more through luck than judgement," scoffed Helm. "The way the kidnapping came off. What I don't get is how they found me at the hotel this morning."

"I spotted a tail," said Erlich. "So I went straight to the hotel and stuck my head out of your window to let them know which room I was in."

"Thanks a bunch!" said Helm indignantly.

"What's the problem?" said Erlich.

"I fail to see why you are so angry, Mr. Scott," added Phileros Makronotis with a forbidding frown. "Your advertisement says you are in the business of taking risks. And you have been well paid."

"Point number one." Helm tapped himself on the chest. "I decide if I take a job. Point number two: the *negotiated* price is paid in advance."

"The last job was rushed, but due to pressure of time," said Makronotis. "And you acquitted yourself magnificently. You must agree, you have been asked to do nothing beyond your capabilities. The oversight of payment can be corrected immediately. Would a deposit of twenty-five thousand pounds to your account be satisfactory?"

"I suppose so." Helm coughed into his fist to clear a throat that had dried out. He could scarcely believe that he had earned £100,000 in a fortnight.

"In that case," said Makronotis, "if you will collect your belongings, Mr. Gladwin will take you to the artist, then to the helicopter. We have decided to take you to the villa until we can organize another trap for the animals who kidnapped my granddaughter."

Gladwin left the table to open the door to the corridor. Helm walked back to his room in a daze. It was all very well to pretend that he had a choice about taking a job, but Phileros Makronotis intended to use him as bait to exterminate four more kidnappers. Even if he refused to co-operate, they could always drug him and sit him somewhere, like a goat in a tiger trap.

He had done three jobs for the Greek billionaire. Each time, the coin had come down heads for the man with the terminal condition. The odds stayed the same for the next job – fifty:fifty, either he survived or he didn't. But the long term was catching up with him.

A tail was bound to come up before the last of the kidnappers was dead, and all that lovely money would go to waste, as far as Robert Helm was concerned. There was no point in having vast amounts of money if he couldn't break out of the cycle of danger to spend it, and his pessimism had nothing to do with the laws of chance. Helm knew that it was just the way the world works.

Abroad was his sister's natural habitat. Since she had started travelling, Steph was always full of the joys of spring, no matter what the season,

and looking forward to her next lap of the globe. Abroad was an occasional treat for brother Bob. He always had one eye on the meter as his holiday allocation ran down too fast. He was going several better than his younger sister now.

Steph had always had a well-paid job as part of her 'abroad', which meant that an employer had a call on all of her time during the day. Big brother Bob was right off the rails in his part of 'abroad' – no rules, no limit on his potential earnings and no obvious way home.

Robert Helm would probably end up leaving his bones on a foreign shore. It was a depressing thought to take to the luxury of the Makronotis villa.

10. VOLUNTARY SERVICE

HELM FOUND HIS WHITE linen jacket hanging in the wardrobe. His jeans had been shortened and pressed. Everything had happened in less than twenty minutes, suggesting that the tailor and his staff worked on the premises. The artist, a dark-haired young man with a serious expression, arrived as Helm was admiring himself in the full-length mirror. The artist, also in a white suit but his needed pressing, looked straight out of college. He left after twenty minutes with reasonable likenesses of the men who had been burned to a crisp in the taxi and the Mafioso with the shotgun.

Yawning, feeling tired suddenly, Helm changed into his jeans. He put the white suit in a zip-up carrier, which was also hanging in the wardrobe. Roger Gladwin arrived to watch the rest of his packing and to make sure that Helm had no opportunity to sneak away.

"How come Erlich still has a job when Makronotis fired that maid?" Helm asked between yawns.

Gladwin lit a small cigar. "He's too useful to sack. He's got a lot of good connections in the Fatherland. And Austria, too. His old man was in the SS. A pal of the boss's old man. And Erlich knows where a lot of bodies are buried. And the maid panicked, not him."

"And he got the girls back in one piece?"

"That too. Put your hat on."

Helm rejoined the crew of the *USS Enterprise*. "Where do we catch the chopper? On the roof?"

"Don't be a plonker! This isn't New bloody York. The pad's about half a mile away. Keep your shades on in the car. And don't look out the windows, okay?"

"I wish people would stop giving me orders. It's like being in the bloody army."

"Where do you want to end up? The villa or the nearest cop shop?"

"Okay, we do things your way." Helm surrendered with another yawn.

"You all right?" frowned Gladwin.

"I feel shagged out. I need something to eat or that's me for the rest of the evening."

Gladwin made a quick phone call. Helm carried his own luggage to the lift and down to the garage level. He put cabin and flight bags in the back of the car. A waiter delivered a high-class Greekburger on a white plate as he was getting into the front with Gladwin.

The security advisor told him that people, meaning cops, would take an interest in someone riding alone in the back of a car belonging to the Makronotis organization. They passed several policemen on the way to the heliport. Most offered a half-salute to the car but none took any notice of the front-seat occupants. The fourth helicopter ride of Helm's life took him out to the middle of nowhere.

The burned-out taxi had gone. A red marker flag made the site look like a one-hole golf course. The helicopter zoomed low over the scrubland, raising a dust storm. To Helm's surprise, there were a lot more rocky outcrops than he remembered. He became quite good at scrambling out of a hovering helicopter to search down-draught-lashed bushes in dust-fog. His Greekburger had dispelled his earlier tiredness.

Helm found the body at the eighth attempt, amid building waves of scepticism from Gladwin. When he waved and pointed to the ground, the pilot drifted away to a flat landing place. The helicopter continued on to the villa with the body aboard, zipped up in a plastic mortuary bag. Helm knew from watching cop shows on television that moving a body is a cardinal sin. In this case, however, there was no mystery about the circumstances of the death.

When the former tenant of twelve stones of decaying flesh had been identified, and his clothes had told forensic scientists as much as possible about his movements, his remains would become an embarrassment. Helm hoped that they would be incinerated quietly, or dumped in the Saronic Gulf to feed the fish.

The helicopter dropped him at the villa, then returned to Athens at once with Gladwin and the body. An Imperial Guardsman showed Helm to a bedroom and told him that dinner would be served at seven-thirty, in half an hour. Helm worked out the time difference and discovered that evening surgery had just started at his local health centre.

As soon as he identified himself, the receptionist asked him to hold the line. A minute or so later, Helm found himself talking to Dr. Bennett, which was an unexpected privilege. The doctor told him that he was booked in at West Kent General Hospital for an exploratory operation at ten o'clock the following morning. The implication was 'turn up or else he would have to find another doctor'.

Helm found Ianos Makronotis in a ground-floor sitting room, listening to a CD of an opera in German. Held offered a simple ultimatum: no operation, no co-operation. Ianos held high-level talks over a private line to the Hotel Renga. Then Helm went back to his room to pack his Olympic Airlines flight bag for a quick trip home.

A uniformed chauffeur found him sitting on the bed with his flight bag on his lap. He drove Helm to a part of Athens airport away from the airliners and main terminal buildings. When the light aircraft was in the air, Helm noticed that it was flying away from the sunset. He tried to tell the young pilot that he was going the wrong way. The conversation ended with a frown and a shake of a lightly bearded head.

Their destination turned out to be Khios, a quarter-moon-shaped island just a few miles off the Turkish coast. Helm was nervous about landing in the dark in an area defined by a double row of small lights. He considered closing his eyes as the pilot lined himself up and swooped toward the ground. Then he decided that he might as well get his money's worth if they were going to crash and burn and get killed.

The pilot grinned a farewell as Helm climbed down to the strip of dusty ground. Helm was just one of a long string of nervous passengers. The next leg of the journey was even more frightening – a Jeep ride at high speed in the dark over rough terrain to the coast.

Helm enjoyed the sea voyage in a cabin cruiser. It was a still night and the dark water looked perfectly level under the stars. The friendly captain even let him have a turn at the wheel when there was nothing close on the radar screen. The crew fed him coffee laced with brandy and let him share their heroic sandwiches when he had nothing to do. Having missed dinner at the villa, Helm found that he was starving and starting to flake out again.

The harbour master at Çeşme welcomed him to Turkey and just glanced at his Irish passport. The name John Scott meant nothing 140 miles east of Athens. A car with a Turkish driver was waiting to speed him to Izmir airport. Helm flew to Istanbul airport aboard a Learjet wearing an unfamiliar company logo. He had an hour to kill before his midnight flight home. He spent most of it in a crew canteen, where he ate an international-standard hamburger, drank coffee and glanced through Wednesday's *Washington Post*.

A man with a French accent brought him a blue overall and delivered a briefing. Helm found that he had joined an air-freight company in a supercargo capacity. The Makronotis organization had found him a seat on a cargo flight from Istanbul to Gatwick. Helm sat in the DC-10's third pilot's seat and listened to the crew swapping horror stories about life in the air.

This is real jet-setting, he kept telling himself – leaping across Europe

at a moment's notice despite minor considerations such as being wanted by the Athens police. It was something that he should be enjoying, no matter how tired he felt. This was the life that went with his advertisement.

Flying west recovered the hour and a half lost on Wednesday. The DC-10 splashed through puddles at Gatwick at two a.m. on Friday morning. Steady light rain made Helm glad of his Greek anorak. A customs officer had a good root in his flight bag when he saw the Irish passport. The bare essentials of clothing, and washing and shaving gear, seemed to convince him that John Scott was a bona fide traveller. The description 'engineer' in his passport was vague enough to include working for an air-freight company.

There was a car with a driver waiting to take him home. Helm set his alarm for eight o'clock and went straight to bed. Maddeningly, sleep eluded him for ages. He remembered looking at his watch at a quarter to four. Then the alarm was dragging him out of a confused dream about flying without an aeroplane.

He felt surprisingly alert after a shower and a shave. In daylight, the scratches on his face made him look like one of Baron Frankenstein's less successful experiments. He had just a cup of tea for breakfast on the morning of his operation. He had lost his appetite.

The range of papers at the newsagent's was overwhelming. If he wanted current news in Greece, the choice was usually between the Marseilles-printed Mediterranean editions of the *Mail* or the *Telegraph*, or the less frequently available *Guardian*. Helm had almost forgotten how relatively cheap the British papers are at home.

He had a nine o'clock appointment with Dr. Bennett. The receptionist looked at him as if she had lost a bet when Helm called at her window. Her ability to put the right name to his face without prompting was a depressingly sure sign that he was locked firmly in the embrace of the NHS now. He had become a regular customer.

"Aha, the extremely elusive Mr. Helm," said Dr. Bennett when he entered the consulting room. "Have a seat. What happened to your face?" he added with a lop-sided, tipsy grin. "Dragged through a hedge backwards?"

"It was a thorn-bush," said Helm. "But yes, I was going backwards at the time."

"Somewhere sunny."

"Greece. I'm working there."

"The District Nurse has you top of her hate list. She's been trying to catch up with you to remove the stitches from the last op."

"She doesn't have to bother. They're out."

"Not a do-it-yourself job?" the doctor said severely.

"By a doctor in Greece. While he was checking me over."

"Oh, what was wrong with you? Doric Diarrhoea?"

"I don't know if it was on the news here, but there was a bomb in a café in Athens on Monday. I caught an edge of it. The doctor took the stitches out while he was pulling bits of glass out of me."

"A lucky escape? I don't remember hearing about it."

"Small bomb in Greece," Helm quoted. "Not many killed. Not any killed, in fact. Just a couple of French women had their legs blown off below the knee."

"Yecch!" Dr. Bennett pulled a face. "That's when your face was scratched?"

"No, that was on Wednesday."

"The day we nearly had this conversation?"

"I had to go back to Greece to get blown up again," Helm told him apologetically.

Dr. Bennett decided that there was no answer to that and got down to business. "The reason I wanted to see you is to put you in the picture about today's op. And tell you about the blood results. You know the last lump was non-malignant?"

"Yes, the news got through eventually."

"I'm hoping you'll get the same result with this one. If not, we'll have caught it in the very early stages and the prospects for clearing it up are excellent. Your first set of blood tests were normal – for what we were testing for – so I need some more blood for the next series. These should confirm what's gone wrong. And your haemoglobin level's down a fraction since the result from the blood transfusion people, so I'm going to put you on iron capsules."

Helm took off his anorak and pushed up his sleeve, resigned to being constipated in a good cause. Dr. Bennett filled another large syringe with dark blood. Then he applied a dressing to the puncture. "Well, that's it for the moment," he said. "The message is: don't worry unduly."

"I've got more serious things to worry about than the possibility of a malignant lump," said Helm casually.

Dr. Bennett glanced at him, noticing again the scratches on his face, and realized that Helm might not be joking. "Well, I'll see you again. Do you have to go back to Greece?"

"This boss doesn't take no for an answer," smiled Helm.

The hospital was a mile away. Helm had plenty of time in hand before his appointment. He took his prescription to the local chemist before heading into town. He received a three-month supply of what looked like cold-cure, time-release capsules rather than the white tablets that had given Mrs. Stowe constipation.

Giving him so many capsules showed that Dr. Bennett had an

optimistic outlook on his chances of surviving the plague of waxy lumps and whatever else was wrong with him. The doctor, of course, didn't know about the trouble that Helm was getting himself into for the sake of jet-setting cash.

When he reached the centre of Maidstone, Helm headed diagonally left for the library instead of diagonally right to the hospital. He soon reached the conclusion that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* deserves an 'X' certificate. In the absence of any concrete information from a doctor awaiting blood test results, finding out more about anaemia seemed to open up worse and worse prospects.

When he reached the hospital, he knew that anaemia is better than Heinz because it offers one hundred varieties – some temporary, some permanent but controllable and some plain killers.

Causes ranged from large blood loss through deficiencies of iron and vitamins to the horrendous. The worst cause was cancer cells migrating to the bone marrow and preventing the production of red blood cells. Helm had stopped reading at that point.

Dr. Bennett had commented on his pale face and his pale, bluish lips at the first appointment. Helm began searching his memory for the symptoms of oxygen deficiency – buzzing in the ears, dizziness, fainting and shortness of breath. The only time his ears had buzzed recently had been after he had been blown up. Being chased by armed terrorists had left him breathless – but he could hardly blame that on his anaemia.

Other symptoms included indigestion, sleeplessness and tiredness, which were hardly convenient conditions for a man of action. At best, his treatment would involve taking iron capsules for a while. At worst; Helm tried not to think about corrosive cancer treatments, which would leave him hairless rather than bald – no eyebrows, no eyelashes, no nothing.

He was ready to sit down when he reached the waiting room at the hospital, wondering if he would end up reduced to a cadaverous, six-stone weakling just because he was a bit short of haemoglobin and prone to develop waxy lumps.

After an hour in a plastic chair, he was yawning when the nurse told him that they were ready for him.

He actually dropped off to sleep while the consultant and her nurse were using the X-ray scanner to guide the probe to the correct area. Helm impressed them later by explaining that he had spent half the night flying home via Turkey.

He arrived home via a convenient taxi at twelve-thirty with two more stitches in his side. He decided to have something to eat, if there was any food in the house, then go to bed. He had been swept off his feet by a rapid current of new experiences. His tired blood needed some

relief from them. He could afford to write off Friday and start afresh on Saturday morning.

He had to think about the history of the eggs and bacon in the fridge. Then he remembered that he had bought them on Wednesday, which made them two days old. He was trying to decide whether to have his eggs fried on both sides or thoroughly scrambled when his doorbell gave a long ring. Helm was genuinely surprised to see the dark green cap when he opened the door.

"Make it quick," he said. "I'm off to bed when I've had some brunch."

"Guess again," smiled Gladwin. "You can sleep on the plane."

"I've just had major surgery," Helm protested.

"Suits you," Gladwin told him, ending the discussion.

Helm sighed heavily and asked himself what would happen if he refused to leave the country. A crack on the head, a needle in the arm and a trip to Athens in a crate addressed to the third floor of the Hotel Renga seemed most likely.

Gladwin helped him to polish off the perishables. Helm unplugged the empty fridge as a reflex economy measure. Paying electricity bills was no longer a problem. Getting off the mad merry-go-round so that he could spend his earnings to date had become his number one concern.

His route out of the country was a new one, as far as Helm was concerned. Gladwin's car took him east along the M2 then via Canterbury to Marston aerodrome. A Learjet with red trim took them to Paris. Helm had bought half a dozen thick paperbacks on the way. He was immersed in a science fiction epic about humans struggling to exterminate native life forms on an alien planet when their commercial flight to Greece was called.

He had surrendered completely to Gladwin. When the security advisor said *move*, he followed. At other times, he sat and read his book. Despite evidence to the contrary, he had convinced himself that their Air France flight was heading for Istanbul. He sat up with a start when they were in the air and the captain started talking about the weather in Athens.

"Where the hell are we going?" he whispered urgently to Gladwin.

"What the hell d'you mean, where the hell are we going?" Gladwin frowned at him. "You know bloody well where we're going."

"We can't go direct to Athens. I'm wanted there, remember?"

"Oh, that," grinned Gladwin. "Makronotis took care of it. See?" He took a copy of *The Times* out of his black raincoat and turned to an inside page.

A brief article in the bottom-left corner mentioned that the IRA connection with the Arab terrorists in Athens was a false alarm. The

owner of a driving licence found at the scene of the burning taxi had reported it stolen with his wallet four days earlier.

"Isn't it great when you're worth a zillion quid and you've got influence?" Helm remarked as he returned the newspaper.

"It was just a matter of waiting a while, then slipping a piece of paper into the system for someone to find."

"As long as they've been told I'm okay at the bloody airport." Helm returned to his book. He dropped off to sleep before he finished the page. He woke up in response to a dig in the ribs, on the other side from his operation, as the airliner was approaching Athens airport. Gladwin called him a regular *Weary Willy*. Helm pointed out, with great dignity, that perfect health and an ability to stay awake weren't demanded in his contract of employment.

The immigration officer on the ground asked John Scott if the police had returned his driving licence yet, proving that some of them kept up with who was currently on the list of suspected international terrorists. Helm said that he hoped to collect it in the city later on and tried not to look too guilty about travelling on a false passport.

He trailed Gladwin to the car park, where they collected an unremarkable Volkswagen commuter car. Gladwin took an envelope from the dashboard and handed it to him. Helm found himself reading a copy of the statement that John Scott had made to the police about his stolen wallet and its contents. He learned that his alter ego had lost a brown leather wallet containing about 20,000 drachmas, £20 sterling, his driving licence and a few postage stamps, both British and Greek.

It was getting quite dark when they reached the city centre. Gladwin parked just off Kotzia Square. The police station faced the main post office. Gladwin did the talking and a little interpreting. Helm showed his passport to confirm that he was John Albert Scott, signed three forms and recovered his false driving licence. He accepted with a shrug the news that his wallet had gone forever. A figment of someone's imagination was no great loss.

Gladwin put his foot down when they left the built-up areas. In a cocoon of headlight, he charged along the road to Rafina, giving an old truck a fright when he completed an over-taking manoeuvre with an abrupt peel onto the road to the villa. They arrived at nine p.m., local time – bedtime, as far as Helm was concerned.

He noticed that bigger weapons come out after dark. The gate guard's neat submachine gun had become an M-15 rifle with a bulky night-sight. Helm had no idea whether this was normal or extra security because four of the kidnappers, at least, were still at large. He decided against asking Gladwin, who wasn't known for giving him straight answers.

The guard checked the occupants of the Volkswagen before opening the gates. Gladwin roared up to the main door of the villa. When Helm and his flight bag had left the car, he waved farewell and zoomed back across the courtyard to the gates. Roger Gladwin had no intention of spending his Friday night stuck miles from civilization.

The door opened when Helm pushed it. There was no one in the hall. Luckily, he remembered the way to his room. He found a white paper bag with a $\pi\mu$ logo on the bed. His laundry had caught up with him. His white suit was still hanging in the wardrobe and his cabin bag had been tidied to a shelf above the clothes rail. Helm unpacked his flight bag and lined up his paperback library on a bedside unit.

He took the opportunity to look up the Greek for 'medicine from my doctor' in his tiny reference library. He wanted to be able to explain his iron capsules. With a jolt of alarm, he realized that it was just as well no one had searched his pockets at the airport. A sticky label with the patient's name on it had sealed the paper bag containing three blister packs of capsules until Helm had removed two of them. That name read 'Mr. R. Helm' when he was supposed to be 'Mr. J. Scott'.

He worried at the self-adhesive label with a thumbnail until he was able to tear off a sizeable chunk. He wanted to keep it looking like a chemist's label while creating the illusion that the name had been lost innocently when he had unsealed the bag.

Despite a meal on the flight from Paris, his stomach began to grumble fiercely. Going to bed became a daft idea with all that noise to keep him awake. He wondered whether it would be better to wait for someone to notice his arrival or just to look for the dining room. He had forgotten where it was, but finding any room on the ground floor was just a matter of opening doors off the hall. He decided to drink one can of lager from his fridge first. If he was still being ignored when his can was empty, he would use his initiative.

His window faced north. He could see a glow behind a hill, which had to be the lights of Rafina, two lighthouses on islands in the channel and moving lights on the sea. A normal, non-decorating Friday night meant the pub with a group of friends and casual acquaintances whenever he wasn't concubined, as Frank Zappa put it.

Life had been anything but normal for the last three Fridays. He had spent them in Greece, for a start. He was wondering for how much longer his life would remain abnormal when someone tapped on his door.

"Come," he called regally.

"Hi, I'm Klara, with a *K*. I'm assigned to you. Sorry I'm late."

Helm turned from the window to see a woman of about his own age. "Hi, I'm . . . please to meet you." Helm had forgotten who he was for

the moment, but he assumed that Klara with a *K* would have been told his name during her briefing.

Klara offered a hand with blood-red nails. Her frizzy, brunette hair came up to about Helm's eye-level, which made her quite tall for a woman. Her even, white teeth looked as if they had cost six months' salary and a couple of months in the dentist's chair. Helm put straightening a couple of his own teeth, which had become buckled, at the top of his spending list. He could afford such extravagances now.

Klara's accent was a husky New Yorker and her voice rose to give most statements the flavour of a question, as if she was seeking approval constantly. She looked like the second lead in an American TV series – the heroine's faithful side-kick, who either faints or drools if a man notices her existence. Helm's immediate reaction was to want to get to know her extremely well.

"A snafu with your arrival time," continued Klara. "I thought I had it in Paris time and I was adding half an hour on."

"It's okay." Helm offered her a chair. "You're here now. What do you mean, you're assigned to me?"

"Mainly orientation and companionship."

"Sounds interesting. Can I offer you a can?"

"Thanks." Klara took a notebook from a side pocket of her summery dress. "Is there anything you need?"

Helm pulled the ring from the can, then looked around the room. "Some glasses, for one thing."

"That's okay. I can drink out of the can. Anything else?"

"I could do with something to eat. But I must have missed dinner by now." Helm's stomach added its own plea for food.

"No problem," smiled Klara. "I can order something from the kitchen."

"Can they manage steak and chips? Medium steak?"

"Sure. Do you want wine with it?"

"This will do me." Helm raised his own can, aware that his tired blood had a severely reduced alcohol tolerance.

Helm discovered that Klara spoke fluent Greek. She too had missed dinner. She joined him in the dining room for a decent-size steak with a token helping of fries. Helm wondered if she was on an unnecessary diet. There was nothing wrong with the figure in the light, summer dress. He found that an attractive companion was as effective as food for keeping him awake. Everything he said or did during the evening was designed to impress Klara with a *K*.

Companionship didn't extend to sharing his bed but Klara stayed with him until one o'clock, when yawns and fatigue swamped him. She encouraged him to give her a goodnight kiss, as if it were the custom of this foreign land, and she responded thoroughly enough to set his tired

blood galloping.

Helm got to know his new friend quite well during an inactive Saturday – certainly much better than any other member of Phileros Makronotis' staff. Most of them were little more than a name and a job description, usually the catch-all 'security advisor'.

The man himself was fat and cheerful, but with his money, Makronotis could afford to smile. His wealth allowed him to command obedience from a significant cross-section of Athenian society. He was a man to whom 'yes' was the only possible answer. His past, like his present, was a matter of choice.

His foster-father, or his uncle, was a pistol-packing, opera and gangster-film lover with a twisted sense of humour. Helm hadn't forgiven old Ianos for hanging him up by his wrists in a dungeon in the early part of the week. But getting his own back seemed a forlorn dream.

Dieter Erlich, the local security advisor, was the son of a former SS-man, according to Gladwin, and a devious member of a master race. He was also suspected of being one million dollars richer after Wednesday's adventure with the kidnappers. He had also come close to writing off John Scott on two consecutive days.

Roger Gladwin, alias Bateman and Lane, was just as devious. Helm knew where he was with Gladwin – the man wasn't to be trusted and he was also responsible for putting Helm through the twin ordeals of a terrorist bomb and the car crash caused by his brainless satellites Alex and Yani and their dead donkey. Even so, Helm quite liked him.

Tsai Yuan-lin, a woman of unknown nationality whose father was Phileros Makronotis, had a certain charm too and she seemed to like John Scott. Her first loyalty was to the boss, however. Helm fancied her but he knew that she was a lost cause. She worked for Craven Kaiser, whom Helm had yet to meet. According to Gladwin, Kaiser's father had been a leading member of the *Ku Klux Klan* before turning FBI informer and then becoming a bounty-hunter for that agency. Makronotis seemed to pick his security advisors from the worst possible backgrounds.

Klara Amercott, born in Buffalo on the shore of Lake Erie, a few miles from Niagara Falls, had moved to New York at an early age. Her father was in the construction business. He had moved back to Buffalo when only-child Klara was in her teens. Her dad had become fed up with paying a significant chunk of his profits to the Mafia.

Klara had celebrated her thirty-second birthday earlier that week – on Tuesday, Helm's day of rest between being blown up in the café and the million-dollar suitcase bomb. She had been married for a couple of years to a real estate agent in Buffalo, but he had run off with a Las

Vegas showgirl after a convention in Nevada. Helm was glad to hear that the ex-husband was currently serving five to ten years in gaol for fraud at a penitentiary near Albuquerque, New Mexico.

After the divorce, Klara had reverted to her maiden name and moved back to New York City, where she had found a job with a Makronotis satellite firm as a legal advisor. She had been in Greece for eighteen months. She was well paid and completely loyal to her employer, which surprised Helm in a cynical sort of way. He had earned £75,000 that week but he felt no loyalty at all to the Makronotis organization. Klara had suggested that she was too well paid to be corrupted – but no one had ever used her for unscheduled target practice.

Helm let Klara do most of the talking, which suited her temperament. They spent part of Saturday wandering about Athens, and part in the shade of an umbrella on the villa's cliff-side terrace, near the cell where Helm had been strung up by his wrists on Klara's birthday.

She had a habit of leaning toward him when she spoke, as if everything was a confidence. Her assignment seemed more pleasure than duty. Helm felt the heat of a Greek summer speeding the chemistry of his naturally leisurely attraction process. In a sense, he was living the life of a gladiator, lusting for a quick fling before Phileros Makronotis prodded him into the arena to do battle with assorted killers. At the same time, he was reluctant to press Klara to move to quickly in case he put her off. Robert Helm's inhibitions were cramping shooting-star John Scott's style, threatening to keep him frustrated until it was too late.

Yet another part of himself was able to view what was going on around him with a strong sense of unreality. If he was doomed, there was little point in trying to store up pleasant memories, for they count for nothing in the long, black night of death. If he had just a few months, or even just a few hours of life left, then nothing really mattered to the gladiator.

Helm was enough of a gentleman not to let Klara see his black view of the future. He was able to entertain her by showing off his newly acquired skill of beating a blindfold when they were alone, baffling her with his ability to navigate in a room full of furniture.

He dropped a few details of John Scott's biography when he was unable to avoid talking about himself. He also shared Gladwin's attempt to pair him off with a female impersonator, but he was deliberately vague about when and where it had happened. Just before dinner, Klara fixed him with her wide, blue eyes and leaned closer than usual to tell him that she knew he was no more Irish than herself. His story was full of inconsistencies, but that was the fault of his completely inadequate briefing. He knew nothing about Ireland but Klara had actually been there.

Helm recovered from a moment of shock by telling her that John Scott was the sort of Irishman who had lived all his life in England. If he had said anything about Ireland he had just been repeating what others had told him and none of it had been intended to be personal reminiscences, which left her rather embarrassed by the failure of her detective act.

Klara's insight reminded Helm that he was just an untrained hired hand, unskilled in the art of creating biography on the fly and it might be a good idea if he stopped talking about himself. Klara knew that he was in Greece on a dangerous assignment connected with the security department, and she knew that she needed to know nothing more.

Sunday, inevitably, was another hot and sunny day. Klara took Helm out in one of the Jeep-clone runabouts to look at some interesting ruins further down the coast. They returned for lunch to find a crowd on the lower terrace. Erlich peeled Helm away from his companion and steered him over to the boss.

Phileros Makronotis was drinking champagne with a rather skinny woman in a white dress and a lot of diamonds. She gave Helm a predatory smile even though she was old enough to be his mother. She made him think of a Roman matron looking over a gladiator to see if he was worth bedding before some huge barbarian scragged him in the arena.

"This is the young man I was telling you about," said Makronotis as Erlich passed a tulip glass to Helm. "John Scott of the Special Assignments Detail of our security department."

Helm put on a 'first I've heard of it' expression.

"I read your interesting advertisement, Mr. Scott," said the woman, holding her predatory smile. "I admire your spirit." She had a purring voice with a trace of a German accent. "The English bulldog spirit."

"Mr. Scott is Irish, in fact, but he lives in England," said Makronotis. "May I present the Gräfin von Arlberg."

"Call me Renate," said the countess generously. "Philo, it is so good of you to lend me a young man who has no regard for danger."

Helm gave the outstretched hand a polite squeeze, blinded by the flashing diamond bracelet, hoping that his polite smile didn't look too sick at the edges. Makronotis had installed him in the private security army like a piece of replacement machinery, and with as much consultation. John Scott was in Greece to be used, or to be loaned out to friends until he broke.

The whole object of the advertisement had been to secure either a lot of money or a quick death. Now that he had a lot of money, he was being denied the chance to enjoy it. Those around him with the really

big money were treating his life with about the same respect as he had for a disposable razor.

While he was sure that his sister would make good use of the fortune that she seemed destined to inherit from him, he couldn't help but find it grossly unfair that Steph had inherited all of the family's lucky genes.

II. DUMMY RUN

HELM BECAME SURPLUS to requirements after the introduction. Gräfin von Arlberg seemed sorry to see him go but Erlich whisked him away using an irresistible grip on his arm. He let Helm load up a plate at the buffet then he took him to an interior room for a briefing. They were on the same level as the terrace and Ianos Makronotis' torture cell.

This room had a larger window than the room in which Helm and Tsai had lunched on Tuesday. There was a thick carpet and several landscape paintings on walls papered with an embossed pattern on cool orange. Erlich sat down within easy reach of one of the four computer stations.

"Ever been to Austria?" Erlich asked as he switched on a monitor.

Helm nodded. "Once. Skiing. Ten years ago. I sprained my ankle on the last day. In the bar."

"This is western Austria." Erlich aimed a blunt forefinger at the screen. "Switzerland on the right, West Germany at the top. The blue is the Bodensee, what you would call Lake Constance. Gräfin von Arlberg is separated from her husband. She lives in Bregweil, at the eastern limit of the lake."

"Where does himself live?" Helm attempted a southern Irish accent.

Erlich frowned at him, then aimed his finger again. "At Schloß Arlberg, eight kilometres south-west of Au."

The castle stood on its own mountain at a height of 2,286 metres. Helm realized with surprise that Count von Arlberg lived almost a mile and a half above sea level, and wondered if he provided bottled oxygen in the guest rooms. His castle sounded a highly unsuitable place for someone with tired blood to visit.

"The Gräfin has some jewellery," said Erlich. "The ownership is in dispute but she has possession. Exact duplicates have been made. Your job is to collect them and then act as a decoy."

"Just like that?" said Helm.

"You fly to Zürich in the morning. Final briefing there. You recovered

your driving license?"

"I got it on the way here. Has everyone been told I'm not in the IRA? As thoroughly as they were told I was?"

"The matter received my personal attention."

"Oh, well, that's all right, then," Helm remarked with straight-faced sarcasm. "What are the chances of collecting my fee? Which we haven't even discussed yet. Any exploding jewel boxes, and like that?"

"Five hundred pounds. Plus expenses. There is no danger."

"Do I get that in writing? A contract?" Helm's tone said that he wouldn't normally get out of bed for such a miserable sum.

"Pack for an overnight stay. But you should be back by Monday evening. Study your route."

A plotter drew him a four-colour map of the operational area. Erlich left Helm to finish his food and study an area bounded by Stuttgart, Augsburg, St. Moritz and Zürich. He made no mention of a lesson in basic German. Helm knew some useful bits and pieces, such as *ja, nein, guten Morgen, auf Wiedersehen* and his numbers up to one hundred.

He also knew some highly inappropriate phrases, such as *Achtung, Schpitfeuer!, Hände hoch!* and *Sieg heil!* A job paying a mere five hundred quid didn't merit the effort of further study. He was having quite enough trouble with Greek.

Makronotis and his party had gone by the time Helm took his empty plate and glass out onto the terrace. Klara was sitting at one of the tables with a cup of coffee, watching a ferry outbound for Gavrión and points south. She knew all about Helm's job the next day. She also spoke fluent German.

"I can't think why they don't send you if there's no danger," Helm told her, pouring himself a cup of coffee. "You sound a lot better qualified for it than me."

Klara smiled. "Greek chauvinism. The men do one sort of work, women do another."

"What about coming with me? Wouldn't a couple driving around seeing the sights look a lot less suspicious than a lone male sneaking around?"

"I'm not very good in an emergency, John. We were in a bus once and a car hit us. Rick, my ex-husband, he told me I took one look at a guy with some blood on his shirt and I fainted dead away. Another time, in college, a kitchen knife slipped. See?" Helm inspected a half-inch, white scar on tanned flesh below Klara's blood-red, left thumbnail. "My room-mate said I must have fainted before I even tried to stop the bleeding. She heard me hit the floor. She reckons I might have bled to death if I'd been alone. Of course, she was exaggerating, but I guess I just can't take the sight of blood."

Helm tried to remember how he had felt after the Fiat *Uno* had hit the dead donkey and he had seen Tsai's T-shirt soaked by his own nose bleed. He had been shaken and sore, but more concerned by the loss of his much-needed blood than by the sight of it. He had not thought about throwing up until weak-stomached Yani had given him a lead. Even then, he had considered vomiting only as a means of inconveniencing Alex and Yani by doing it in their Range Rover.

"What's all this about blood anyway?" he demanded. "I'm doing a *safe* job. I'm only getting paid peanuts, so it must be safe. Or do you know something I don't?"

"I'm sure you've been briefed properly," said Klara.

"What if I break a saucer and threaten to slash my wrists if you don't tell me everything you know?"

"Don't, John," shuddered Klara.

"Sorry." Helm realized that she really did have a very real horror of blood in the wrong place. "Can you tell me anything about Count Arlberg?" He put the saucer back on the table and unfolded his map.

Klara leaned closer and stabbed the map with a blood-red fingernail. "He runs the *Gletscher* Klinik at Meersdorf. Here, on this tongue of land at the north end of Lake Constance. Cosmetic surgery, drying out drunks and drug rehabilitation for the rich and famous. Very discreetly. It's a hundred and forty kilometres straight down the Autobahn from Stuttgart airport, or sixty from Zürich on ordinary roads, plus a frontier crossing. It's easy to get to but your destination isn't obvious when you leave the airport. There are stories they also have facilities for cryonic storage. You know, freezing bodies after death until a cure can be found for what killed the person."

"Sounds a bit Dr. Frankenstein," laughed Helm.

"Of course, no one knows for sure if they do it. Outside the Count's magic circle. But the rumours are very strong. And if you've got the money, you do what you want."

"How much has the Countess got? Of her own?" Helm knew that having £100,000 wasn't enough to let him do what he wanted; spend it.

"About ten million. Dollars, that is. It was money marrying money. But you can't buy youth, even with ten million bucks."

"Yes, she looks quite good from a distance," nodded Helm. "But you can see the wrinkles when you get close."

"That's why the Count has a small harem now."

"How many millions has he got?"

"Twenty or thirty. Plus his castle. It would cost at least a hundred million to build it today."

"Not quite in the Makronotis super-league, then? What's the boss getting out of lending me to the Countess?"

"They had an affair about twenty years ago and they stayed friends. And Helena, one of her daughters, is supposed to be his. And he plain just can't *abide* Max von Arlberg."

"So what are his minions likely to do to a decoy duck?"

"Maybe knock you about a bit if they catch you. But you're not dumb enough to let them get near you, are you, John?"

"I find your faith in me most touching," laughed Helm. "And I'm not being paid enough to let anyone duff me up."

Lunch out of the way, Klara took him up the coast to Rafina for a look at the port town. They watched a human tide swarm onto and off a ferry, inspected the ethnic ornaments and plaster statuettes in the tourist shops and had coffee and sticky-sweet cakes at a sea-front café.

Back at the villa, Helm ran into Gladwin while Klara was telling the resident mechanic about a small problem with the runabout's clutch. They met in the hall. Gladwin had just emerged from Phileros Makro-notis' study. "Why's the boss playing musical jewels for an old mistress?" Helm asked.

"She's given him the inside track on some deals her old man cooked up," grinned Gladwin. "You know about his harem?"

"It's been mentioned."

"It was her way of getting back at him for preferring his women younger and better looking."

"So it's favour for favour? Not just doing an old flame a good turn for friendship's sake? That makes more sense."

"Talking about friends, I shouldn't get your hopes up about Amercott. She bats for the other team. Stone ginger."

"You're kidding!" gasped Helm.

"Well, she's from New York. They're all queer there. Same with your Chinese bird. They're an odd lot out East. She quite fancies Amercott."

"Is there any chance of ditching John Scott now?" Helm switched to less mind-blowing ground. "Erich says everyone's been told about the lost licence but I have this vision of some idiot of a village bobby grabbing me and thinking he's got Carlos the Jackal. Or even worse, taking a shot at me. The cops are armed to the bloody teeth over here."

"Stay with Scott, it's safer," said Gladwin. "Suppose the kidnappers start checking you out in England? And go looking for your family to put pressure on you? If they know you as John Scott, they're going to come up empty."

"I thought we'd established the kidnappers are just a bunch of local crooks, not international terrorists?"

"If they were just a bunch of local crooks, do you think they'd have been daft enough to kidnap a grandkid belonging to Phileros Makro-notis?"

"You think someone put them up to it? Organized them?"

"If you saw a sealed cardboard box, could you be sure what's in it without looking?"

"If it was under a café table in Athens, I wouldn't look in case it blew my bloody head off," Helm said with feeling.

"Not even if someone offered you twenty-five grand?" scoffed Gladwin.

"I don't need another twenty-five grand. What I need is a chance to spend the hundred grand I've already got."

"In a rush to buy your Porsche?"

"I'd rather have a Merc. They've got class. All a Porsche's got is a funny shape and a huge price tag."

"You should have enough for a dozen Mercs by the time you finish your contract, you lucky sod."

Gladwin disappeared into another of the ground-floor rooms, indicating that the conversation was at an end.

"But I haven't *got* a bloody contract," Helm told the closed door.

He plodded up to his bedroom and dropped into an armchair. Another possibility had occurred to him – Makronotis thought that he had done Helm a favour by letting him go home for the operation. That meant that Helm owed him the favour of playing decoy with dummy jewels. The equation was unreasonable, but in the real world, what goes on is determined by the man with the money.

John Scott had become a commodity. Feed money into his building society account and watch him rush smiling into the jaws of death. Phileros Makronotis was going to keep on using him until he had taken his revenge on the kidnappers or until Scott reached his expiry date. All that the modern Hercules could do was wonder how many of his twelve labours he would survive.

Taking him to the villa after someone had gone to the trouble of moving his luggage to the Hotel Renga had to be a security decision. Had he escaped from the hotel, he could have disappeared into a city full of tourists. That was pretty impossible stuck in an isolated, guarded spot on the coast – unless he tried diving into the sea from the terrace and swimming home.

It was ironic, Helm told himself, how he had got himself into this mess by over-reacting to Dr. Bennett's calm reassurance.

There had been nothing to worry about in the case of the first waxy lump. Now, it made no difference whether the second was harmless or the most malignant piece of tissue in the whole history of the universe.

There were much more immediate dangers to face as a member of Phileros Makronotis' Special Assignments Detail, his *Kamikaze* squad. None of the dangers would shake him more than Gladwin's revelation

about Klara and Tsai. That sort of thing never happened to James Bond and other secret agents.

Dieter Erlich drove Helm to Athens airport on Monday morning, and escorted him to the final check-point at the boarding gallery, as if making sure that Helm had no opportunity to disappear. The flight lasted two hours and twenty minutes. Helm ate a second breakfast, without an iron capsule this time, and he read about a third of one of his thick paperbacks.

Zürich was fifteen degrees cooler than Athens. It felt positively chilly, despite the sun. After he had converted the temperature into more meaningful Fahrenheit, Helm realized that he had gone from the low nineties to the mid-sixties. He was wearing a lightweight suit, which had arrived at the villa during Sunday evening, a green-striped shirt to match part of the subdued check, and one of his unicorn cravats. He was dressed too warmly for Greece but too scantily for Switzerland.

Roger Gladwin had warned him to keep his mind on the job and himself to himself while he was away. The AIDS rate in Switzerland is three times the British rate due to the Swiss hobby in former times of taking sexual safaris in Africa. Helm doubted whether he would have time to catch another fatal disease during a one-day, five-hundred-quid job.

A man with a hawk-like profile and a mohair suit met him at the airport. Having confirmed that he had found Herr Scott, the man gave his name as Clerment. Helm took charge of the keys of a modest BMW with silver stripes along its dark blue flanks and an extra tax disc on the windscreen to entitle it to use the Swiss motorways. He also memorized a local telephone number, which he was to use the next morning if he still had the parcel.

Helm drove south from the airport and ignored Clerment's instructions when he tried to steer him onto the E60 at the edge of Zürich. Helm had \$1,000 in traveller's cheques and a healthy wad of Swiss francs in his inside pocket. He wanted to buy a pullover so that he could do his jet-setting in more comfort.

Reluctantly, Clerment gave him directions to the department stores. Helm realized that his passenger had been less than frank about his identity when he spotted the name Clerment on the first of a row of stores.

Clerment did the talking, Helm did the paying. He spent 1,880 francs, three-quarters of his allocation of Swiss currency, on a white cashmere pullover, and enjoyed every second of the experience. There were other garments priced up to 3,000 francs but he decided that anything over a thousand pounds for a pullover had to be a rip-off.

He left the store feeling very swellegant. This was real jet-setting along the lines of his original concept. If Phileros Makronotis intended to keep John Scott on the payroll until his luck ran out, then he would have to feed one of the best-dressed corpses in Europe to the fish when the time came.

Clerment decided to remain in Zürich, as if worried about getting into some real trouble if his charge couldn't obey orders. Helm set off alone in his striped BMW. His instructions, when he eventually reached the motorway, were to head east until he came to the St. Margrethen interchange, then take the lakeside road round Lake Constance, passing through Bregweil, where the Countess lived. His time was his own for about three hours then. He decided to visit Friedrichshafen.

At the borders with Austria and West Germany, he told the officials that he was just passing through on an excursion to see the home-base of the pre-war transatlantic Zeppelins. He arrived slightly ahead of schedule and found that he had an hour for lunch. When he flashed his wad of Swiss francs, the proprietor of a lakeside café let him use his personal telephone for a private call to England.

Edward Stowe, the junior partner of Lancer and Stowe, sounded as if he had given Helm up for lost. Helm explained that one set of tests had provided a negative result, so his anaemia remained as big a mystery as ever, and he was still waiting to hear about the second lumpectomy. Stowe wished him well and reminded him that he still had a week left of his month's leave.

Helm was disappointed to find that the Zeppelin works was long gone, bombed flat in World War Two. There was a brand new Zeppelin museum in Neu-Isenburg, but it lay a convenient fifteen kilometres from Frankfurt-am-Main and a massive 270 kilometres out of reach of his current position.

He had to settle for buying an old boy in the café a couple of litres of beer to lubricate his throat while he delivered an account of Friedrichshafen's glory days in fairly fluent English.

Helm became so engrossed in the story that he had to make up a quarter of an hour on the return trip to the Austrian border. A slight detour allowed him to return to Austria on the motorway. He had just enough time in West Germany to get the BMW up to 180 kph on the clock.

He told the officials at the border that he was just passing through Austria on his way for a look at the postal museum in Vaduz, the capital of Liechtenstein. He parted with some of his small stock of schillings to pay the motorway toll. His notes on the dashboard reminded him that the advisory 130 kph speed limit on German motorways becomes compulsory in Austria.

Toward the junction of the newer section with the older part of the E60, a couple of kilometres from Bregweil, a red Porsche drew alongside him. The driver had to reach up to post a shoebox-size parcel through Helm's open passenger window. Helm had to make a determined effort to keep a straight course during the manoeuvre. Part of him kept asking what would happen if the parcel contained a bomb instead of fake jewellery.

Helm left the parcel on the seat and stood by to be intercepted. He was still waiting when he reached the capital of one of Europe's oddities. Vaduz looked like just another tiny but picturesque Swiss backwater that was full of dodgy businesses and even dodgier money. His tourist information told him that the Principality is slightly smaller than Washington, D.C.

The road enters from Austria between two small mountain ranges and follows the Rhine valley down the western side of the country. The rest is mountains. Swiss francs, of which Helm had a severely reduced pocketful, are the national currency. The official language is German but the locals can use a national dialect to discuss foreigners within earshot, like the Welsh.

Helm found a car park. His parcel weighed about four pounds. Nothing rattled when he shook it. He tucked it under his arm and took it for a look at the State Art Collection, which includes 800 modern works shut away in three massive steel cabinets for lack of display space, he learned from his guide book. In the adjacent Postal Museum, he was unable to resist a poster of all Liechtenstein's stamps from the earliest issues of 1912 to date.

He spent another 200 francs on presentation packs of stamps, partly for their curiosity and investment values, and mainly for the job of lashing out expenses money on something useless. He had collected stamps for a while in his teens but the hobby had died a natural death at about the time he had begun under-age drinking.

Helm still had his parcel at five o'clock. Erlich had promised that someone on the other side would have relieved him of it by then. Helm had endured an agony of suspense, not knowing how he would be mugged. The possibilities had come down to either a violent assault from the rear, probably involving being beaten unconscious, or just an unobtrusive approach by some smooth bastard with a polite smile and a gun issued by Count von Arlberg's security department.

Using his initiative, Helm called it a day and booked a room at the Hotel Maksimillian, attracted by the curious spelling. He wrote 'Roger Lane, Esq.' on the parcel and asked the receptionist to put it in the safe until further notice. He handed over a 20-franc note with the parcel to ensure prompt attention.

His room looked rather decadent with its red, flock wallpaper and a large bed with a polished brass frame. It looked like something left over from the grand old days of the Orient Express and Dornford Yates adventure novels. Helm wondered whether the receptionist had thought it appropriate for a rich, romantic Irishman.

Showered and shaved again, with his suit freshly pressed, he went out into a cooling evening in search of a restaurant that could handle English. He was expecting new orders in due course. Finding him to pass them on would be a test of Dieter Erlich's qualifications as a bloodhound.

Helm's choice of Viener Schnitzel with french fries and green beans was unadventurous but he knew what to expect and he was pleased with the chef's efforts. He finished the meal with a piece of chocolate cake with cream and coffee with cognac. He was counting notes onto the saucer with his bill, refusing the convert the total to sterling, when a young woman sat down at his table.

Her elegant cocktail dress was shiny black. She wore a single strand of pearls and earrings that looked like red plastic buttons. Her honey-blond hair was piled up on top of her head and secured with a silver comb. Her natural expression was rather remote but she became much more attractive when she aimed a pleasant smile at Helm.

Helm found the lady's black, fold-over evening bag of particular interest when she showed him the neat, self-loading pistol in it. It was a perfect attention-grabber.

"I'd have thought a girl with your looks wouldn't have to be quite so persuasive," Helm remarked.

"We will walk to the door quite naturally, Herr Scott," his companion told him in a quiet voice with a German accent.

"What if I faint, right now?" mocked Helm.

"My friend will help you out of the restaurant."

Helm followed the direction of a significant glance. A chunky man in a dinner jacket lifted a hand in greeting from the doorway.

"There are two others," added the elegant young woman. "But they are in reserve. Where is your car?"

"Oh, it's still in the car park," Helm realized. "Near the art gallery."

"Ticket?"

Helm searched his pockets then handed it over.

"Thank you, sir." The English-speaking waiter picked up the saucer with an inquiring look at the lady.

"Come on, darling, we shall be late." The woman took Helm's arm in a possessive grip and stirred him to the door. "We shall look at your car," she murmured through a contented smile.

The chunky man tagged on behind when they left the restaurant. The

blonde on Helm's arm was about Tsai's age, mid-twenties, a couple of inches shorter than Klara Amercott and her perfume had to have cost a good \$500 per ounce more than Klara's. In other circumstances, Helm would have been eager to get to know her. Gladwin's awful warning lingered, but he was now in Liechtenstein, not Switzerland.

The lady had the natural grace that comes from good breeding and an expensive education. She knew how to make the most of her assets and hide any defects. She was a jet-setter, the class that newly rich Robert Helm burned to join before the Makronotis organization wrote him off.

Inside the car park, the chunky man took his hand out of his right-hand jacket pocket long enough to show Helm a man-size, self-loading pistol. His was as big as a Beretta model 92. The blonde took Helm's keys, drew on driving gloves and searched the BMW from engine compartment to boot.

"All right, where is the parcel?" she said patiently. "We know you did not deliver it."

"In the post." Helm had had plenty of time to think up a plausible lie as a delaying tactic. "In the event of a hitch, my final order was to post it. It had an address label and they gave me the right stamps to stick on it."

"Why did you not tell me before?"

"I didn't think you'd believe me until you'd searched the car," Helm said innocently.

"Okay." The blonde looked at her companion, then waved him to the back seat. "Now, we go for a drive."

Helm took the wheel, well aware of the guns behind and beside him. The blonde's directions took him onto the road to the north. Helm wondered if she was taking him to see Schloß Arlberg, home of the count of the same name. There would be a slight problem when they reached the Austrian border. He had left his passport at the hotel. Making life easy for kidnappers wasn't one of his priorities, however.

The sun had just set behind the Swiss mountains on his left, on the other side of the Rhine. A rosy glow was fading from the highest peaks. It was the sort of view beloved by directors of tourism. When they drove out of Schaan, on a wider trunk road, the mountains were black and sinister. Only Helm knew that they were five kilometres from an interesting border incident. The other two seemed relaxed and confident, on top of their job and doing it well.

Helm began to think about what could happen at the frontier. If the Makronotis organization could boss around the Athens police, how much power did an Austrian count worth one hundred and thirty million dollars hold? One way of complicating matters would be to skid

at the checkpoint and shunt the barrier. The Austrian border guards had submachine guns with a long magazine projecting from the handle. They looked more than a match for a pair of amateurs with hand-guns.

A violent bump made the wheel jerk in his hands. Helm's teeth slammed together, missing his tongue by a minute fraction of an inch. The car leapt again before he realized that someone was shunting *him* from the rear. Then there was another car alongside, smashing him over to the side of the road.

Helm stopped on the hard shoulder. A red-headed man in the car beside him was pointing a submachine gun at his window. The blonde and her satellite got out. A short, dark man relieved them of their guns then slid in beside Helm. He made a U-turn gesture with his left forefinger. Helm had seen enough of them on TV and in films to know what an Israeli *Uzi* looks like. His new passenger was holding that breed of submachine gun in his right hand, aiming it across the car.

A three-vehicle convoy turned onto the opposite carriageway, leaving the blonde and her companion stranded. Helm's driving mirror showed him a woman with dark hair at the wheel of the third car. He listened for sounds of bodywork scraping on a tyre, then he concluded that any damage to the BMW caused by this latest gang of ambushers was cosmetic and slight.

"Nice evening for it," he remarked to his passenger.

"Shut up and drive," said the other. He had an American accent.

Helm realized that he had not been rescued. He had been kidnapped at gunpoint for the second time in half an hour, and the blonde in the slinky black dress had been lying about her reserves. He was becoming a proper sucker for silly stories. He was also becoming quite used to having guns pointed at him.

It was an unsettling experience, but there was no need to panic if he told himself that the gun was there to ensure good behaviour. He was being very co-operative and if the kidnappers used their weapon on him, he would be in no condition to do whatever it was that they wanted him to do.

His passenger hadn't fastened the top three buttons of his lemon shirt. Among the black curls was a silver Star of David. The man looked more Jewish than Greek. Another nation had entered the kidnapping game.

Helm couldn't understand why he had been kidnapped by a bunch of Israeli gunmen. He had read a lot of bad things about the Israeli secret service, such as their ruthless application of torture and murder. Somehow, he had got himself involved in something a whole lot more serious than a five-hundred-quid decoy job.

12 UNDER COVER

THE UZI DISAPPEARED into a carrier bag as Helm re-entered Vaduz. He was surprised at how well the shape was disguised but he could see that his escort's finger remained close to the trigger. The thin plastic wouldn't affect the flight of a bullet. Helm wondered what effect the muzzle flash would have. Would it set fire to the carrier bag? Or would it just glue smears of plastic to the barrel, forcing the gunman to spend hours scraping with a razor blade to clean up the weapon?

"Left at the next corner," said the gunman.

Helm noticed that the other two vehicles kept straight on down the main street.

"Stop after the blue Renault and sound your horn."

Helm beeped twice. A pair of tall, wooden gates on the other side of the street opened. Helm drove into a courtyard in the middle of a row of office buildings. The black gates closed behind him. He parked neatly between the painted white lines of a bay, beside the only other car in the courtyard. Just a handful of the offices showed lights.

The gunman took his Uzi out of the carrier bag, showing that he was on home ground and not concerned about being seen armed. Helm entered an open door. The Uzi prodded him toward the yellow lights of a staircase.

Helm turned left in response to another prod at the first floor starting to feel really pissed off with the method of direction. The corridor ran between a row of windows on the courtyard side of the building and unremarkable offices.

"In here."

A door with a frosted panel stood open a few inches. As he entered the office, Helm became aware of a peculiar smell. It had a spicy tang with a hard, throat-catching edge.

There were thick curtains at the windows and on the door's frosted panel. Two lights with red shades cast an infernal glow. Helm stopped to avoid walking into something unseen. The gunman closed the door

and pushed past him to hold a brief conversation with a shape on the other side of the room.

Helm didn't recognize the language. As his eyes became more accustomed to the darkroom lighting conditions, he realized that the office was furnished as a sitting room. There were four armchairs, two coffee tables and two units filled with books and computer equipment.

"Sit down," said the gunman in American-English. "And remember," he tapped the Uzi, "I'm in the other room."

"Well, hoo-bloody-ray," muttered Helm as he shuffled to an armchair.

The gunman pulled a wall hanging aside and left by a concealed door. The other man was wearing a Homburg hat and a dark suit. He had a wispy, white beard with several bald patches, curly sideboards and he wore a black patch over his right eye, under his glasses. His appearance lay on the borderland between sinister and comical.

"So, Mister, tell me your name," said the old man. He inhaled from a fat cigarette but seemed not to exhale.

"You sent two carloads of gangster to grab me and you don't even know who I am?" Helm's synthetic indignation dissolved into a coughing fit as a thread of smoke reached him. He had discovered the source of the peculiar and quite unpleasant smell. He realized that the old man was smoking cannabis.

"We were watching Eva Arlberg," said the old man. "When she collected you we became interested. So, Mister, what are you? A doctor? Or maybe a microbiologist?"

"You what?" said Helm, baffled.

"Maybe I should see your passport."

"Maybe I left it at my hotel."

"So what were you going to do at the border?"

Helm shrugged. "That wasn't my problem. They had all the guns so it was up to them."

"They kidnapped you?"

"Just like your gang."

"Why?"

"I don't think it's any of your business."

"Suppose I make it my business, Mister? Suppose I tell Avvi to break your kneecaps?"

"If you want to know that badly, I suppose I can tell you." Helm had no intention of losing any kneecaps on a five-hundred-quid job. "Did you know the Countess von Arlberg is getting a divorce?"

"So?"

"So I was in a plan to move some jewellery for her. I suppose the Count sent this Eva to get my package. Is she his daughter, or something?"

"So you're working for Renate Arlberg?"

"No, I'm working for a friend of hers, who lent me to her for this job. I've met her once, for just a couple of minutes. The only other member of the family I've met is this Eva."

"So you're not in the medical business?"

"It says 'engineer' in my passport." Helm broke off for a coughing fit. "Can we open a window?"

The old man pressed a button on the arm of his chair. An extractor fan behind him began to hum an off-key rhythm. He pressed another button for an intercom and issued a brief order in an unknown language. "This cigarette is medicinal, not for pleasure," he told Helm. "This engineering you do . . ."

"Civil engineering," interrupted Helm. "You know, roads, bridges, dams, that sort of thing." The old man seemed to have an obsession with medicine. Helm chose to tell a big lie, knowing that his captor could hardly tell him to build a bridge to prove that he was telling the truth.

"So what's a civil engineer doing delivering jewels?"

"I told you, I'm working for someone else. He asked me to do this job as a favour for the Countess. The only qualification is a valid driving licence."

"So where are the jewels?"

"They caught up with me after I delivered them."

"So what were they doing with you?"

Helm shrugged. "Your guys arrived before they told me."

"So they were taking you to Schloß Arlberg? And you without a passport?" chuckled the old man.

Helm shrugged again. "They didn't know that."

"So they're not so clever, eh? What's your name, Mister. I'm Sigismund Morgenstern."

"John Scott." Helm knew what *Morgen* means and he had seen a white star on the cover of *Stern* magazine. A morning-star, as far as he could recall, is a mediaeval club with a spiked ball on the end. The name tipped the balance from comical to sinister, as far as the old man was concerned.

A dark-haired woman entered the gloomy office. She was small, dressed in dark clothing and she left before Helm could get a good look at her. She had brought two glasses in silver skeleton-frames. Slices of lemon floated on the clear, dark liquid.

"So what do you think of these Arlbergs?" said Morgenstern after a healthy swig of lemon tea.

"It wouldn't bother me if I never heard the name again." Helm put his glass down after finding that the lemon tea was much too hot for a

normal person to drink.

"Would you be willing to do a job for me against them?"

"People usually pay me for jobs. Looking down the barrel of a gun doesn't help my concentration."

"This is a job you will want to do, gun or no gun. And an engineer is just the man to do it. You know about the *Gletscher Klinik*?"

"If that's the Count's place, I know it's sixty kilometres from Zürich or a hundred and forty from Stuttgart, and it dries out rich drunks. But I've never been there."

"You've heard about their cryostore?"

"What's that?" Helm played dumb.

"Where they freeze the bodies of people with fatal diseases until some clever doctor works out a cure."

"I thought they only did that in the States."

Morgenstern shrugged. "All it takes is money. You know how many bodies they have in their crypt?"

"Obviously not, if I don't know anything about it." Helm sipped his tea. It tasted like *Earl Grey*.

"Thirty-one. And you know what most of them are?"

"Dead and rich?" suggested Helm.

"Nazis!" Morgenstern practically spat the word onto his carpet. "And you know who's in crypt number one?"

"Not Martin Bormann?"

"The Number One Nazi, that's who!"

"The Big Boss? *Sieg heil*, and all that?" scoffed Helm.

"Don't mock, Mister. They never found his body."

"Hitler shot himself. Then his staff burned his body with Mrs. Hitler. And didn't the Russians produce his skull? That someone had been keeping in a filing cabinet for the last few decades? And didn't they get Hitler's own dentist to check out this teeth?"

"Russians!" Morgenstern spat out another word, showing that he grouped Communists with Nazis. "You know how many doubles he had? Actors they made into exact copies with plastic surgery? And had their teeth fixed the same? Eight! And that's only the ones we know about. You don't think a man with his power couldn't get out of Berlin? Even with Russians all around?"

"Even if he did get our alive, he must have died long before they invented freezing with liquid nitrogen."

"So who needs liquid nitrogen, Mr. Engineer? Did the mammoths they got out of glaciers need it? With the flesh in perfect condition? Did the cavemen they found perfectly preserved in another glacier need it? Do you know what it takes to grow a new body for him? One tiny little nucleus out of one cell!"

"It wouldn't be the same person, though. Adolf Hitler was the sum total of his memories and experiences. A clone wouldn't have any of that."

"You think these Nazis can't educate him? Give him those memories? A living image of the Number One Nazi?"

"That's just science fiction," scoffed Helm. "Years off."

"You think they can't wait a few years now? Where are they going? Nowhere! All they've got to do is lie there, frozen stiff, waiting to come back. And you know when they'll come back? In the new millennium. The new Hitler will be born again in the year two thousand."

A born-again Nazi! thought Helm, sipping his lemon tea. He knew that the third millennium doesn't begin until January first, 2001, but Morgenstern's story sounded well rehearsed and he doubted whether the old dope-fiend would appreciate having to learn a new version.

"And while they're lying there," continued Morgenstern, "what's their money doing in Swiss banks? Growing like crazy, that's what. And you know what paintings are doing on the international market? New record prices every year. And you know how many paintings the Nazis stole that haven't been found?"

"Lots?" said Helm.

"Hundreds. Thousands. They had the art of the whole of Europe to choose from. And not just paintings. But you know how we can stop them taking over the whole of Europe again when the new, cloned bodies have grown, Mister Engineer?"

"Get the authorities to investigate the clinic?"

"The authorities!" scoffed Morgenstern. "You don't think Arlberg and his clients don't own enough Nazi politicians to keep the *Gletscher Klinik* private?"

"You could get the Israelis to blow the place up. Killing a few rich drunks wouldn't bother them."

"You think we haven't tried? What we need is an engineer to look at the inside. To look for structural load points so we can bring the whole roof crashing down on the vault to destroy it utterly."

"What makes you think they'd let me survey the inside of the clinic?" protested Helm. "What makes you think they'd let me through the front door?"

"Arlberg's greed. You have something he wants – the jewels."

"True. But I delivered them." Helm remembered his lie just in time. He was weaving such a broad web of fantasy that he was bound to fall through a serious hole eventually.

"How does he know you were telling the truth?"

"Well, Eva searched my car."

"Did she search your hotel room?"

"They don't know about the hotel."

Morgenstern smiled. "So you go there tonight. In the morning, you take your passport and you drive to Meersdorf, to the Klinik . . ."

"My car took a battering when your lot stopped me," interrupted Helm.

"So we get it fixed. Which hotel?"

"The *Maksimillian*."

"Leave your car here. It will be waiting in the morning. When you get to the Klinik, ask to see the Director. You tell him you must speak to Arlberg on a secret matter. *Geheimsache*. You speak German?"

"Not so's you'd notice."

"Remember that word. *Geheimsache*. When Arlberg arrives, you tell him you're willing to double-cross his wife."

"Why should I do that?"

"Did you look at the jewels?"

"No, they were all wrapped up."

"So you're not a curious man? Some of the pieces have been in Arlberg's family for centuries. Some of them are more recent gifts. The total value has to be at least eight million dollars."

"Bloody hell!" Helm felt glad that he was carrying the replicas. He didn't fancy the crushing burden of looking after the originals.

"You will tell Arlberg you are a man of honour. You think it's not right for the jewels to pass out of his family. Tell him he can have them back for a price. Start to bargain at one million schillings."

"How much is that in real money?"

"About seventy-five thousand dollars. He will try to force the price down, of course. When he gets to his highest offer, tell him you are an engineer and you want to look at the cryostore while you think about his offer. Remember the security precautions, and when you find all the main structural load points, accept his offer."

Morgenstern pressed the intercom button again and issued further orders in the strange language.

"You will tell Arlberg you have the jewels in a safe place," he added to Helm. "And you will take them to an agreed rendezvous in Austria at noon on the day after tomorrow, on Wednesday. Tell him you have to collect them in person. When you leave the Klinik tomorrow, drive to Zürich and phone the number I give you. My men will contact you when they are sure you are not being followed."

"What do I do till then?"

"Look at the shops, have a drink in a café. When you have made a report on the best places to plant explosives, I will pay the other half of your fee."

"I'm not that sure I want your job," said Helm, sensing a presence

beside him. The dark-haired woman had entered the office silently. She placed a slim wad of notes on the arm of his chair. Helm could just make out the figure *1,000* in the red gloom. The notes were dollar bills and there were ten of them in a neat fan.

"Mister Engineer, it's your duty as a human being to take this job," said Morgenstern.

There was a flavour of *you can run but you can't hide if you don't* in his voice. Helm realized that he had a Makronotis-type free choice over the job – do it or else! The telephone number was typed on a square of white card. He found it when he picked up the thousand-dollar bills. It fitted neatly into one of the credit card pockets in his wallet.

"I have every confidence you shall play your part in making the world safe for future generations, Mr. Scott," Morgenstern added. "But remember, if you think of double-crossing me, don't think I can't find you again."

"I don't think that for a moment," Helm assured him as he tucked the money into his pocket. He couldn't decide whether an explicit threat was any worse than an implied one, but he felt better now that he knew that he really was in even more trouble today than he had been in yesterday. He had come to hate uncertainty. The possibility of being doomed was infinitely worse than actually being doomed. Not having options allowed him to focus his attention on what had to be done.

"Until tomorrow, Mr. Scott," said Morgenstern.

The short, dark man, minus his Uzi, escorted Helm down to the courtyard, relieved him of the keys and drove away in the battered BMW. Helm found his way to the main road and wondered if he would be able to find his hotel. The evening was darkening but it looked very bright still to someone who had spent twenty minutes in darkroom lighting conditions.

Helm spotted a familiar park after wandering along the main road for a few minutes. Vaduz was too small to hide a large hotel for long. He entered the lobby wondering if he had rival spies from Morgenstern and Count von Arlberg's respective gangs watching him. Helm had forgotten his room number but the receptionist remembered a twenty-franc tip and handed over the key as Helm reached the desk.

He called room service to ask for a stiff brandy when he got to his room. The waiter turned up with a full bottle of Courvoisier and a balloon glass. Helm wondered whether to be insulted – did they think he was an alcoholic? Then he dropped a five-franc note on the tray and nodded a dismissal.

He made himself comfortable in the armchair, poured a generous measure of brandy as he was allowing himself only one, and tried to pick up the thread of his book. He had had quite enough of real life for

the moment. His most recent adventures had left him with a craving for escape into a fantasy world, where magic ruled and the author applied a keen sense of humour.

He ordered a roast chicken sandwich and a pot of coffee at ten-thirty, wondering whether the waiter would arrive with a loaf, a complete bird with all the trimmings and an urn. The neat thermal jug filled his cup twice and he had to use the knife and fork on a sandwich containing big pieces of white meat and a lot of trimmings.

By now, he had decided that he was playing a waiting game. Now that he was out of the darkroom gloom, Sigismund Morgenstern was looking more like the weirdo that he undoubtedly was and marginally less terrifying. Helm was in the process of convincing himself that even if Morgenstern had a whole gang of armed minions at his command, if John Scott could run far enough and fast enough, then he could get away.

There was no reason for Morgenstern to hunt him down. It made more sense for the ancient dope-fiend to keep watching the Arlbergs if he wanted another sucker. If he was feeling honest in the morning, Helm could even put his \$10,000 in the hotel's safe, less reasonable expenses, and tell Morgenstern where to find it from a safe distance.

Reaching that safe distance, however, depended on having transport. So he had to play his waiting game until Morgenstern's minions had organized repairs to the BMW. And waiting for that to happen gave him a good excuse for sitting tight in the hotel and doing nothing.

An hour after his meal, Helm found himself yawning and reading whole paragraphs without taking in the sense. He went to bed, determined not to answer the phone if Erlich or another of Phileros Makronotis' security advisors tracked him down and tried to give him further orders in the middle of the night.

He woke some time later. He was having another of his nights of broken sleep. There was a 'V' of pale light at the window, where the curtains had blown apart. The bed moved. Helm became aware simultaneously of perfume and someone sitting on his bed.

"Bloody hell, Tsai, is that you?" he groaned.

"Sorry to disappoint you, darling," chuckled a female voice with a German accent. "You won't scream?"

Helm saw a glint of light from a gun barrel before he closed his eyes again. He wanted to wake up and find that he had been dreaming. But he knew that reality had caught up with him again. He had waited a bit too long.

13. PERSONAL FOUL

AS HIS HEART SLOWED DOWN from a dizzy race, and he regained control of his breathing, Helm's mind began to work again. He was almost used to having guns pointed at him and he could analyze the reason why it was being done. In this case, Eva von Arlberg wanted him to do something. He wouldn't be able to do it if she shot him. Therefore, the gun was irrelevant. And she couldn't get away with firing it without a silencer in the early morning stillness of the hotel anyway.

"What the hell time is it, anyway?" Helm asked casually with a yawn that wasn't entirely forced.

The blue eyes flicked to the bedside clock, then stabbed back at him as if suspecting that Helm would take advantage of the distraction. "Five-thirty."

"Leave it out, Evie! I'm not bloody getting up at half-five." Helm turned onto his side, putting his back to the intruder, and closed his eyes again.

Something cold closed on his left wrist. Helm opened his eyes. Eva flicked the gun toward the brass frame of the bed.

"I'm not much use at kinky sex at this time of the day, either."

The gun flicked again toward the frame of the bed. Helm fastened the other part of the handcuff to a post and closed his eyes yet again. He heard slithering noises. The bed moved. The gaoler was getting in with her prisoner.

"Move over," Eva told him with a yawn. "And in case you have other ideas, the key is in my bag, with my pistol, on the other side of the room."

Helm digested the information for a moment. "What if I just go ahead and rape you anyway?" he said at last.

"Don't be silly, darling," chuckled Eva. "You are too much of a gentleman. Now shut up and go to sleep."

Helm became aware of regular breathing a few minutes later. Eva von Arlberg had gone to sleep, completely sure of her control of the

situation. It had to be something to with the arrogance of aristocracy, Helm told himself. Her confidence also told him that she wasn't alone. She had to have at least one assistant lurking nearby. Helm was still trying to think of something to tell the night porter on the phone to ensure his release when he drifted off to sleep.

He woke with a start an unknown time later and looked at his watch. He had actually managed to sleep for over an hour, handcuffed and with a strange woman in his bed. Eva von Arlberg was having breakfast – bacon and eggs with coffee, by the food smells.

She unlocked the handcuff and ordered another breakfast from room service while Helm was in the bathroom with no access to his outer clothing. She was wearing jeans and a light pullover of the same dazzling white as Helm's expensive cashmere. It looked a more suitable outfit for sneaking around in the early hours than the previous evening's cocktail dress and pearls. Her honey-blonde hair was pulled back into a pony tail, making her look less aristocratically aloof. The pistol lived in her shoulder bag. She kept her distance to give herself time for a quick draw.

"What sort of gun is that?" said Helm when the waiter had delivered his English breakfast.

"Walther *Taschenpistole*," said Eva.

"Doesn't *Taschen* mean pocket?"

"What did Morgenstern want with you?"

"He wanted to know if I'm a doctor."

"So you told him you are an engineer?"

"How did you know that?" frowned Helm.

"It says so in your passport, darling. What happened?"

"When I told him you were chasing your mother's jewels, he lost interest."

Helm popped one of his Feospan Spansules out of the blister pack to take his daily dose of iron. Eva watched his suspiciously, then concluded that suicide pills don't usually come more than one to the pack. She poured herself more coffee then resumed her study of a German newspaper on the other side of the room.

Helm began to wonder about Morgenstern's deposit of \$10,000. He had put the notes in the pillow case for safe keeping. He couldn't figure out how to retrieve them under the eyes of his captor. Then the lady herself solved his problem. She locked the door to the corridor and took the key into the bathroom. Helm thrust the notes into a spare sock. He tucked three inches of the sock inside the waistband of his underpants as an improvised money belt.

His next worry, on the way out, was whether the receptionist would ask him if he wanted the parcel in the safe. He was relieved to see a

woman on duty. She smiled as he paid his bill in cash. Then she handed him the keys of his repaired BMW and wished him guten Morgen. Helm replied with an auf Wiedersehen, hoping that he would be back. Despite the constant cycle of kidnappings, he rather liked Liechtenstein.

The chunky, dark-haired man from the previous evening joined them as they left the hotel, heading for the car park. He got in the back of Helm's silver-striped, blue BMW. Eva von Arlberg took the keys from Helm and pointed out two more cars belonging to her private army. The white BMW led and the green one followed when they set off.

At the Austrian border, the officials saluted a count's daughter. They barely glanced at John Scott's passport. The convoy sped through mountains for thirty-seven kilometres, climbing steadily, apparently unaware of the 100 kph speed limit outside built-up areas.

Helm remembered that he was supposed to call Clerment's Zürich phone number if he still had the parcel of replica jewellery at that point. Strictly speaking, the Hotel Maksimillian had the parcel, not him, which was just as well because he had forgotten two digits in the middle of the number.

Having dealt with that problem, he sat back and enjoyed the views. His driver was nothing to say as she concentrated on driving as close as possible to barriers at vertical drops and sheer rock walls. He told himself that Eva wasn't really suffering from a death-wish and that trying to wrestle control from her was too dangerous to attempt. She was just playing a form of 'chicken' with him – a jet-setters' game.

The castle impressed Helm immediately. It looked like the work of a relative of Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria. Turret after turret grew from grey walls, each crowned with a conical, terracotta roof. There were battlements, vertical-slit windows for archers and horizontal-slit for crossbowmen, and a huge pit with a steel bridge just before the gatehouse.

There was no drawbridge but the solid doors looked strong enough to resist a battering ram until an invading army got fed up of having boiling oil and boulders dropped onto its collective heads. There was even a raised portcullis inside the gatehouse tunnel. Cars parked in the courtyard and fluorescent lights behind large windows spoiled the mediaeval atmosphere.

Helm was willing to bet that there was central heating and modern plumbing, not roaring log fires and a long drop down to an evil pit, which could also be used to dispose of the occasional inconvenient prisoner.

Eva handed her pistol to her bodyguard, who had rushed out of the back of the car to open her door. Helm had to open his own door. He wasn't obviously under guard but there was nowhere to run with the

main doors closed. The courtyard was about twenty yards square. The lowest of the surrounding walls soared a good twenty-five feet toward the clear, blue sky. Helm's heart was thudding rather. He put it down to tired blood trying to cope with the altitude rather than fear.

"Do you have to check your weapons when you get here," he said as he headed for a doorway with Eva. "Like in a Wild West saloon?"

"It removes temptation from you," Eva said coolly. "You can forget about grabbing me or shooting your way out."

"My reputation precedes me," scoffed Helm.

"Yes, Herr Scott. We heard how efficiently you dealt with the kidnappers of Sophia Makronotis."

Helm had no answer to that. Eva took him down to the cellars in a lift. The stone corridor lacked personality. It was dry, brightly lit and it smelled faintly of paint. A dark, wooden door with an iron grill opened on well-greased hinges into a stone chamber. Before Helm could react, a large man snapped a handcuff onto his left wrist.

There were two beefy retainers in the dungeon to discourage resistance. The chamber measured twenty by thirty feet. Its walls were smooth stone and they looked as if they had been carved out of the mountain. Helm found himself tethered to an iron ring set in the wall at head-height. Tsai Yuan-lin was hanging just out of reach, her toes an inch or so from the floor. The manacles were steel, not the rope favoured by Ianos Makronotis, and they had dug into the flesh of her hands.

"Welcome to Schloß Arlberg, Herr Scott."

Helm turned to see Eva von Arlberg standing beside a tall, grey-haired, beautifully dressed man – presumably, her father.

"Hi, Max." Helm tried to insult the nobleman with familiarity. "I don't think much of your hospitality. Or do you decadent Austrians get a kick out of torturing women?"

"Yes, Fräulein Yuan-lin does look rather uncomfortable," smiled Graf von Arlberg.

He signed to the beefy retainers. They unlocked the manacles then carried Tsai over to a table. It wasn't until they had attached ropes to her wrists and ankles that Helm realized that it was a rack.

"How tall are you, Herr Scott?" said the count.

"Six foot one," said Helm.

"And your little friend is about three-quarters of a foot shorter. You would make a very handsome couple if you were the same height."

"Tell him bloody nothing, John," Tsai said defiantly.

"Women are said to have a greater capacity for pain," smiled the count. "Also deception. When she delivered her package to the bank in Zürich, thirty seconds ahead of my men, she gave them a victory wave

on her way out. What she failed to anticipate was the unprofessional attitude of others. My men were still inside the bank, wondering how to explain their failure, when her package was collected less than five minutes later. They should have been suspicious when the man just threw it casually onto the back seat of his car. But they followed him home and waited until night before they visited him.

"They left without waking him. He had left the parcel conveniently on a table in the entrance hall. Hardly the place to leave family jewellery worth nine point five million dollars overnight. Shortly afterwards, they collected Fräulein Yuan-lin from her hotel and Eva set about finding you again. Have you an expert knowledge of jewellery, Herr Scott?"

"Not so's you'd notice," said Helm.

"You know, of course, that diamonds cut glass?" The count used one of his daughter's rings to draw a fancy *A* on a hand mirror. One of the retainers handed him a shoe box of jewellery. None of half a dozen stones selected at random would cut into the glass.

"They are the same hardness," said the count.

"So?" said Helm.

"So I would like to examine your jewels?"

"How do you know we weren't both decoys?"

"Examining your jewels would tell me just that," said the count patiently.

"Tell him bloody nothing, John," repeated Tsai.

"How much is the young lady worth to you, Herr Scott?" The count accepted a battleaxe with a curved blade from one of his retainers.

"You wouldn't dare," said Helm as the blade hovered over Tsai's throat.

"I might," smiled the count. "But there is no need to go to such an extreme. Would you be prepared to sacrifice a small part of her? For what might be a box of mere replicas? Say, her thumb?"

"Tell him bloody nothing, John," Tsai ordered.

Graf von Arlberg raised the axe.

"No!" Helm shouted as the axe swung down.

The blade crashed into the frame of the rack. Helm felt cold suddenly. There was a lead weight inside his stomach. He felt weak with relief when the count stepped aside to reveal that he had missed Tsai's hand by a good six inches. "You have something to tell me, Herr Scott?" the count smiled.

"It's in the safe at the Hotel Maksimillian in Vaduz. Waiting to be collected by Roger Lane."

Eva von Arlberg nodded to her father and left the dungeon wearing an expression of cool triumph.

"I could add loyalty to my list of the superior qualities of a woman,"

the count remarked. "Fräulein Yuan-lin is clearly prepared to suffer mutilation in the line of duty. Your loyalty to your employer is not so strong."

"I don't work for Makronotis," said Helm. "I'm strictly free-lance. And no one's paying me to watch you chop Tsai to bits."

"You too soft for this job, John," Tsai said regretfully.

"I want you to remember that every time you count up to five on your left hand," said Helm. "You might be prepared to let these guys play games with you, and take a few thousand from Makronotis in compensation for what you consider an industrial injury. But I don't think someone else's jewellery is worth getting seriously damaged over. And don't expect me to apologize for doing you out of your heroic gesture."

"Bravo, Herr Scott," said the count. "A man with a sense of values, no matter how mistaken, is to be applauded. I think we can move you to more comfortable quarters now."

The beefy retainers released Tsai and Helm, and escorted the prisoners to the lift. The doors opened again when the light reached '3'. Tsai and Helm crossed a corridor to a tower room. The door closed behind them with a solid thud. A key turned in the lock and a bolt thumped into a socket.

Helm found a sheer drop of at least 300 feet below both windows. A staircase around the wall descended from their room to a bedroom and a bathroom on the floor below. The door from the bedroom to the second-floor corridor was locked. There were two sets of luggage on the double bed. There could be no awkwardness about sharing with Tsai, Helm realized, in the light of Gladwin's revelation.

"You think we're going to be here for a few days?" said Helm when they were back in the sitting room. A tray with coffee and biscuits had been delivered in their absence.

Tsai replied with a shrug.

"Are you not speaking to me? Because I let you down?"

"Your decision, you live with it, John."

"And don't think I can't live with it. A few bits and pieces of jewellery are replaceable. A thumb isn't. And it's not as if they weren't Max's jewels in the first place. Would you be happier if he'd cut your thumb off?"

"Course not!" scoffed Tsai. "You give in too easy. We have coffee now?"

They sat together on the sofa. Helm filled two cups and presented a cup and saucer deliberately to Tsai's left hand. "Why should I let him play games with me if he's not paying for the privilege?"

"Ah!" smiled Tsai, as if a great mystery had been revealed. "No pay, no play ball? I buy that, John."

"How long were you hanging like that?"

"Five minute."

"I thought you'd been there for hours, the way those manacles were digging into you. I can still see the marks."

"Not hurt now. So, what happen to you yesterday?"

"Not much for a long time. Eva didn't catch up with me till dinner-time. By then, my parcel was in the hotel safe." Helm went on to describe how he had been kidnapped by Eva von Arlberg, rescued by the forces of Sigismund Morgenstern and recaptured by Eva.

"This guy Morgenstern think Max got Adolf Hitler in clinic?" said Tsai incredulously when he ended his tale in the castle's cellars.

Helm shrugged. "That's what he told me."

"You believe him?"

"Do I look bloody daft?"

"This guy a bit mad?"

"This guy a lot mad. But if he's in the Mad Millionaires' Club like Max and old Makronotis, he can get away with it. Like I said, he gave me ten thousand dollars, just like that. And I suppose there's the same to come."

"What you do with it?"

"Post it back to him from the airport, I guess. Okay, so I owe Max a kick in the teeth, but I'm not getting involved in major league arson. Do you want the job? And the twenty grand?"

"Got other things to do, John."

"How come you didn't fly straight home yesterday? After your delivery?"

"Stand by to help decoy duck."

"In case Eva's team got violent? Did you know you were the decoy duck?"

Tsai shrugged. "Need to know. I didn't. You too."

"You think I really had the sparklers? Someone would have collected them if I had the real ones. Wouldn't they?"

Tsai shrugged again. "Max tell us soon."

They spent the next two hours reading. Helm had his own paperback. Tsai selected a *Maigret*, in French, from a glass-fronted bookcase. Just as Helm was wondering if they would get some more coffee for elevenses, Graf von Arlberg, his daughter and two retainers strolled into the sitting room. One of the retainers was carrying a wooden box of shoebox size and a hand mirror. Both retainers kept a close watch on *kung fu* expert Tsai.

"A brief demonstration," said the count. He scratched lines on the mirror with half a dozen diamonds in splendid settings. "If a thumb is worth nine point five million dollars, how much is the whole body

worth?" he added.

"Beats the hell out of the *Six Million Dollar Man*," said Helm. "Even taking inflation into account."

"You regret your decision, Herr Scott? Or have you thought of a way to break the news to your employer?"

"I don't regret it for a moment. It wasn't my fault the job became a cock up. We both did what we were supposed to do."

"Fräulein Yuan-lin can explain your views to Herr Makronotis. She is free to go now," smiled the count. "Take your book with you, my dear. Transport to Innsbruck airport is waiting and your flights have been booked. Tell Herr Makronotis he can have Herr Scott back in a day or two, when I have finished with him."

"What you do with John?" said Tsai suspiciously.

"A very simple job," said the count.

"Suppose he doesn't want to do it?" said Helm.

"Oh, but he will," smiled the count.

"I stay and help," said Tsai.

"He will not need your help," said the count.

"Glad to hear it," said Helm. "I don't think you have a choice," he added to Tsai. "Or I do."

Tsai thought the matter over, then she gave him a hug and a surprisingly warm kiss of farewell. Helm began to suspect that Gladwin had been having him on. If Klara worked in Athens, and Tsai had been brought in from outside, it was likely that they had never met and Gladwin had been testing just how gullible Helm was. Again.

Eva von Arlberg led Tsai down the staircase to the bedroom to collect her bag. Helm and the count walked along the third-floor corridor to another sitting room in another tower. One retainer went with each party. The other room had two tattered, Austrian-eagle flags and fans of weapons mounted on the walls. The chairs were upholstered in the same royal blue as the retainer's uniform. The frames were of curled, dark wood with the von Arlberg crest in enamel mounted on the top member. Helm took an instant fancy to them.

On a handy table was a bottle of what looked like champagne in a silver ice bucket, and two glasses on a silver tray. Helm turned his head to read the label as the retainer was pouring. *Sekt* turned out to be fairly dry, fizzy white wine, which was extremely drinkable.

"Prosit," said the count.

"Ya sue," said Helm, taking another swig. "What's this job? And what are the chances of getting killed doing it?"

"One you know all about. To survey my cryostore for Herr Morgenstern and to take him a sketch of the main structural load points."

"How do you know about that?" Helm almost dropped a very

expensive, lead crystal glass.

"You told me yourself."

"Eh? Oh, you mean you were listening at the keyhole?"

"Electronically. Crouching in corridors is so undignified. I believe you have ten thousand dollars about your person? Would you care to hand it over? Or would you rather be searched for the sake of your honour?"

"Why?"

"For safe-keeping. And to give you a reason for calling on me again when you have completed the job."

"You really want me to help this nutty old Jew to blow up your cryo-store?" Helm said incredulously.

"I imagine that he has a limited supply of explosives and he wishes to place them where they will do most damage. Hence his need for an engineer. No doubt you will find the adventure amusing. And I am well insured."

"Ah!"

"You are busy drawing conclusions, Herr Scott?"

"So Morgenstern's right? You really do have thirty-odd bodies and heads frozen in liquid nitrogen?"

"Sixty-eight, to be strictly accurate."

"At a hundred thousand dollars a body and thirty-five for a head."

"Slightly more."

"Including Adolf Hitler's body or head?"

"Herr Morgenstern would appear to believe so."

"Is he for real?"

"His obsession is very real. And he controls eight million dollars. Of which you have ten thousand, which you were going to give me for safe-keeping."

Helm dug out his emergency money container, feeling rather foolish, and handed it to the retainer.

"Have my secretary put the money in the safe," said the count. "And return the sock to Herr Scott's luggage."

The retainer gave either a deep nod or a shallow bow, and left with the warm sock of money.

"Interesting fellow, Morgenstern," said the count. "He is seventy-nine and weighed down with many imaginary ailments, which he treats by smoking a revolting herbal mixture, of which at least fifty per cent is dried cannabis leaf."

"I know, I had a whiff of it." Helm pulled a face. "I didn't know he's as old as that."

"Age is difficult to judge in the dark. He will last a good many years yet – to the regret of his grandchildren. They have spent a fortune to have him declared incompetent so that they can lay their hands on his

money. But he has the better lawyers.”

“Is it true the Israelis have attacked your clinic?”

“They too think he is mad,” chuckled the count. “Israeli Intelligence has nothing to do with him. But he has persuaded others to try to slay the dragon. They gave our security staff a little exercise.”

“So let’s get this clear,” said Helm. “You’re going to give me a plan of your cryostore showing the best place to plant bombs? You’re in some sort of financial trouble with it and you’d rather have the insurance money? So what do I get out of it?”

“As I understand it, you get twenty thousand dollars from Herr Morgenstern.”

“What do I get from you?”

“My grateful thanks, and my assistance in earning your fee. It would be illegal for me to give you money.”

“And so’s conspiring to burn down your clinic. It strikes me you’re doing bloody well out of me,” Helm said indignantly. “Jewellery worth nine and a half million bucks, and I don’t know how much more if your cryostore is destroyed by a well-known nut case. Aren’t you going to buy my silence? I’d settle for a couple of these chairs.”

“I admire your good taste but that is quite out of the question. The jewels belong to my family and you were paid by Herr Makronotis for transporting them. You will be paid by Herr Morgenstern for the plan. Why should you be paid twice for the same job?”

Helm thought about threatening to warn Morgenstern that he was being played for a sucker, then he thought better of it. There was no point in handing out free information. He replied with a shrug and drained his glass.

“To quote Fräulein Yuan-lin,” smiled the count, “no pay, no play ball? Give me one good reason why I should pay you anything at all.”

“Because you can afford it,” said Helm. “And you can’t afford not to. Two for the price of one.”

“The reason I asked is that I am interested in how experienced you are in your job. You talk of thousands of dollars, but I have a feeling the numbers mean very little to you.”

“Really?” said Helm frostily.

“Have I offended you?” smirked the count. “Or have I had my ration of free conversation from you? Perhaps we had better get on with our business. If you turn left at the door and go along the corridor to the third door, my daughter will attend to the plan and your transport.”

Helm was thinking about the count’s words as he left the turret. Perhaps he *had* become intoxicated by the numbers in his building society account. He was collecting telephone-number sums of money and they had a certain unreality, which would persist until he had a

chance to enjoy his fortune.

Looking at matters objectively, his services were worth no more than a call-out charge of about £25, plus about £10 per hour, plus a large premium for toiling to all hours in foreign parts. On the other hand, there are people who are paid vast sums of money for doing precious little – TV personalities, the wet hens of the City of London, all sorts of people like that. If they could do it, there was no reason why Robert Helm in his John Scott suit shouldn't join their privileged ranks for a while.

Despite the circumstances, he had quite liked the count at first – once the drama with Tsai was behind them. Now, a rather romantic uncle figure had become just a rich crook with a dream home, a lovely daughter, short arms and deep pockets. Max von Arlberg wasn't fit to be a European aristocrat with his own castle and a great line in chairs.

The count could have said the third turret on the left as easily as the third door. Eva von Arlberg was cleaning a pistol in her circular sitting room. She had the pieces arranged on an oily cloth on a silver tray.

"You know what this is?" she said.

"Looks like a *Luger*," Helm said casually.

"A very common mistake," Eva told him in a smug tone. "In fact, it is a *Parabellum Nul Acht*. Luftwaffe issue."

"You collect guns?"

"Of a certain sort. Are you ready to go?"

"I guess so."

"Like that?"

"Why not?" Helm was wearing a perfectly decent suit and his expensive cashmere sweater.

"I suppose it will do. Come on."

Eva abandoned the pistol and headed for the staircase. Helm felt like swinging a shoe at her bottom when she had descended to a convenient kicking height. The whole family was playing games with him. Eva's was one-upmanship.

Her father was trying to set world records for getting something for nothing. And John Scott was letting them do it to him – mainly because he had no power to stop them. Eva disappeared into her bathroom to wash oil off her delicate hands. Helm stopped to stare at the décor.

He had never before seen a Nazi battle flag used as a bedspread. The walls were a jumble of flags, weapons, badges and insignia, medals and framed photographs. Eva von Arlberg slept in a history lesson about the Third Reich.

"Look at the picture on the left of the window," Eva called from the bathroom.

Helm recognized the castle's courtyard. And the man with the Charlie

Chaplin moustache. "Who's that the Führer's shaking hands with?"

"My grandfather. Hitler enjoyed visiting castles. He liked ours especially."

"Were you listening in on my conversation with Tsai too?"

"What do you think, darling?"

"Are you in on the conspiracy to bring Hitler back to take charge in the third millennium?"

"Wasn't that an amusing story?" Eva sat down at her dressing table to brush out her blonde hair. "You like my collection of Nazibilia?"

"Very impressive."

"I collect mainly to shock people. With the added advantage that it is an investment. And my knowledge will be very useful tonight. When you lead the attack on the cryostore."

"You what?" Helm sagged onto a chair.

"You must be sure to wear something distinctive so we do not shoot you by mistake," Eva added blithely, squirting herself with an atomizer. "Do you like this perfume?"

"It'll do," Helm said mechanically.

"Now, darling, let us not be ungracious," laughed Eva.

"Lead the attack, you did say that?"

"The mad old Jew has to take you for two reasons. You will have been inside the cryostore and to make sure everything you will tell him is the truth."

Helm gave her a weak smile and told himself not to panic just because he was in over his head again.

You should be used to that position by now, he told himself. I mean, all you're expected to do is lead a suicide squad on a lunatic mission to make the twenty-first century safe from the creators of Eva's Nazibilia.

Piece of cake, really!

14. HEIL HITLER!

HELM WAS GRATEFUL for Eva von Arlberg's silent concentration on her drive during the 97-kilometre journey to Meersdorf in West Germany. Her Ferrari rushed down from the castle to the valley, crossed into Switzerland where the Rhine flows into Lake Constance, across the bridge to Konstanz, and on to Meersdorf. Eva turned into the grounds of the *Gletscher* Klinik at twelve-thirty. She gave Helm a pair of mirror sunglasses to wear and a large, light box to carry.

The clinic reminded Helm more of a large hunting lodge than a hospital. It was constructed of light-coloured stone, which gave it both solidity and grace. Royal blue drainpipes rose four storeys to a roof of grey-green tiles. There were at least a dozen large windows along the length of the façade.

The grounds contained tall trees for shaded walks, bushes for screening, bright areas of garden and a golf course. It looked a very comfortable place for rich drunks to dry out or worn-out jet-setters to recharge their batteries..

The staff offered respectful greetings to Eva and ignored the slave with the big box, which was as effective a disguise as being invisible. Their destination was a private dining room on the second floor. The furniture was dark, old and very highly polished. Lunch was traditional British fish and chips with brown bread and butter. Eva smiled across the two-person table and awaited her guest's approval.

"No dandelion and burdock?" said Helm.

"Is that a side salad?" The expectant smile became a mild frown.

"It's what you drink with fish and chips, not white wine. And it should be malt vinegar, not red-wine vinegar. And supermarket white bread. But I'm sure the salt and pepper are okay. If it's white pepper, not black."

"You're playing the game!" Eva gave Helm a beam of delight. "How is your fish?"

Helm speared the crisp, golden batter with a silver fork and sliced

with a silver fish knife. "First class," he had to admit. "Is this that famous Austrian wine? Geschutzmittel?"

"If you mean anti-freeze, the word is *Gefrierschutzmittel*." Eva scored an effortless point in the game of one-upmanship.

Helm turned his attention to the diagram in front of his plate. He saw the building itself half an hour later. The cryostore was located two hundred yards from the almost hunting lodge and hidden away in the trees.

There was a timber-clad, single-storey office block at ground level. Helm and his empty box waited patiently until Eva had exchanged a few words with an unobtrusive security guard. Then they walked twenty yards along the central corridor to a lift almost at the other end of the building. "You remember the number?" Eva said when she had tapped out a security code on the keyboard beside the call button.

"I wasn't watching," Helm admitted.

"Eighty-one, five, five, nine. I must write it on your plan." Eva led the way into the lift. "This is the only access to the underground complex."

"What makes you think Morgenstern will take me on his raid? Hasn't he got a gang he knows and trusts? He's more likely to keep me locked up until afterwards."

"He thinks no one would refuse to help him destroy Hitler. He believes everyone else must share his obsession. And you must be on the raid to make sure he attacks the right place. He may believe the cryostore is under the main building."

"Which is profitable, so you don't want it blown up?"

"Exactly. And he will trust you more if you go with him. He will know you will not lead him into a trap because his gang will shoot you if you do."

"That's comforting to know," sighed Helm.

The lift doors opened onto gleaming whiteness. Helm put his sunglasses on again and dumped the box beside the lift. There was a reverend hush in the long vault, which ran at right angles to the building on the surface. Helm wondered if the distinct chill was purely psychological. He was glad to be wearing his cashmere sweater anyway.

"If someone comes to look at the cryostore, we put staff in white coats down here, but the monitoring is all purely automatic." Eva gestured to a computer with an impressive array of winking, multi-coloured lights. "The area behind the computer is where the corpses are prepared, where they drain out the blood and put in the *Gefrierschutzmittel*. Or cut the head off. The short, upright cylinders beyond the operating area are where the heads are stored. Four in each, so they have someone to talk to. The big, horizontal cylinders along the left side are for the whole corpses."

"I bet you don't talk about corpses like that in front of the cash customers," said Helm.

"If someone pays more than two million schillings to have a dead body frozen, we play the game with them."

"Is all this legal?"

"Of course. Every corpse has been declared legally dead by two doctors of unchallengeable reputation. If the next-of-kin chooses to have it frozen instead of burned or buried, that is not the concern of the state."

"Old Morgenstern gave me the impression this whole set-up is illegal."

"Morgenstern thinks we have Adolf Hitler here," Eva said dismissively.

"Don't believe things people tell you, son," Helm told himself. "You don't believe these bodies can be brought back to life by some medical advance?"

"Do you, darling?" scoffed Eva.

"Not this side of the second coming."

"And not if you will blow them up tonight!"

"That too. I saw a programme on TV about this. An outfit in the States. They had blokes going round, taking the lids off the tanks and measuring the depth of the liquid nitrogen with a wooden ruler to find out if it needed topping up. Do you do anything as low-tech as that?"

"Of course not! It is all automatic. And if you will open the tank, water and carbon dioxide freeze out of the air and clog everything with ice."

"So how come you want such a well-organized set-up blown to bits by the Mad Morgenstern?"

"The store is full."

"So it's all expenditure from now on? No more mugs paying their two million to have their loved one frozen. Not unless you spend some money on extending this place. So Daddy's going to take the insurance and run. No wonder you can afford to run a Ferrari. Who carries the insurance?"

"Some of your Gnomes of Zürich."

"As long as it's not Lloyds of London." Helm felt that he could tackle the job with a clear conscience if he wasn't swindling his own country, and if no one would be near enough to be hurt when the explosives went off.

"Come on, darling," smiled Eva, linking arms. "I will show you the best places to put your bombs."

"Wouldn't you achieve the same effect by draining the tanks and letting the bits thaw out? You can't re-freeze them if that happens."

"The Mad Morgenstern wants to show the world a victory against the Nazis, even if they exist only in his cannabis-dreams. So there will be bombs and a big bang."

Helm's silver-striped BMW was waiting in the clinic's car park when the tour was over. On the way to Konstanz, he noticed that the petrol gauge was showing 'full'. The von Arlbergs may have been fond of playing games but they remembered the essentials.

Helm wasn't sure if it was the Irish passport, but the Swiss customs officer insisted on checking the interior of the car, the boot and the engine compartment after he had pawed through Helm's cabin bag. There was no body search, but Helm was glad not to have \$10,000 in cash on him. Even the poster of Liechtenstein's stamps had to come out of its cardboard tube for an inspection.

Helm left the car on the edge of Zürich's shopping centre. He refused to flinch when he got the attendant to translate the car park's scale of charges. He had found that he could make Swiss prices seem almost reasonable if he assumed an exchange rate of 20 francs to the pound sterling instead of 2.6. His next stop was a stationery shop. He bought a packet of envelopes and had the cryostore's plan photocopied. Then he spent a quarter of an hour looking for a post office.

He sent the original of the plan, complete with notes in Eva von Arlberg's handwriting, to himself at the poste restante section of the main post office in Athens. He obtained a fine collection of Swiss stamps by sending the envelope registered and express. More of his expenses money went on a pair of jeans and a dark anorak. They were more practical terrorist gear than his suit, which he locked in the boot of the BMW with his cabin bag.

He ordered coffee and a piece of Black Forest cherry cake in a café and used the flat handle of the fork to slit one of the envelopes down the sides so that he could spread it flat. He copied the photocopied plan of the cryostore by hand on the inside of the envelope. Then he folded the envelope back to its original shape and returned it to the middle of the packet, taking care not to damage the securing band of paper. He visited the toilet to tear up the photocopy and flush it away. Preparations completed, he made his telephone call to report his position to the Morgenstern branch of the Black Hand Gang.

He was drinking his third cup of coffee and he was well beyond the half-way mark of his blockbuster paperback when a man with curly black hair and a bright green shirt sat down at the next table. Helm recognized Avvi, who kidnapped people at Uzi-point and broke kneecaps for the mad millionaire Sigismund Morgenstern.

Avvi worked his way through a cup of coffee, a glass of brandy and two pieces of cream cake, showing that he too was on expenses. His bill would have kept an average Third World family fed for a couple of months. Helm left the café first and strolled about aimlessly until Avvi caught up with him.

"You're not being followed," Avvi muttered. "This way."

He led Helm into a side street and then to another café. They walked right through the public area to the kitchen, and straight into a Volkswagen van parked right outside through the van's side door. The driver moved off before Avvi had finished closing the door. Helm sat down on one of the bench seats and put up with being ignored after Avvi had run an electronic box over him to check for bugs transmitting his position.

He stepped out into the black shadows of a courtyard five minutes later. The brick building had dark green window frames and drainpipes, and window boxes full of bright flowers. Brass nameplates caught the sun on the other side of the cobbled yard. The place reeked of old money and continuing steady income. The occupants were clearly proud of what they did and they wanted everyone else to know it.

Helm climbed the marble stairs of a tiled staircase to the first floor, going ahead of Avvi, who kept his right hand ominously in the pocket of his black leather jacket. Helm was ready for the red glow in the black-out office, but Sigismund Morgenstern's herbal cigarette set him coughing immediately.

"So, Mister Engineer, you did your deal with Arlberg?" said Morgenstern. Contrarily, the black patch had moved to his left eye.

"I guess so," said Helm.

"Let me tell you how much you got for the jewels. Lots of promises but no cash. Am I right?"

"He didn't put his hand in his pocket, no."

"That Arlberg is a miser. Watch out, or he will swindle you. You made a plan of his clinic?"

"Could be." The mercenary in Helm wanted to see some more money.

Something hard rammed between his shoulder blades. Helm raised his hands automatically. Avvi charged through Helm's pockets, tossing everything onto a nearby table. He switched on a low-power reading lamp to check through his finds. Then he shook his head.

"You left it in your car? Or you posted it?" Morgenstern picked up the packet of envelopes with the air of Sherlock Holmes making a breakthrough.

"It's almost like being back with the von Arlbergs," remarked Helm. "Only they show you the gun instead of shoving it in your back. You've got no idea how much that pisses me off. And how unco-operative it makes me feel. And how bad my memory gets if I'm worrying about being shot."

"You don't like our hospitality? I don't blame you." Morgenstern issued orders to Avvi in what Helm assumed was Hebrew. "Sit down, Mister. Have some coffee. Or a beer."

"Beer, please." Helm dropped into an armchair after reloading his pockets.

A tall glass, a bottle and \$10,000 arrived on a red tray.

"Have a closer look at the envelopes," said Helm.

Morgenstern split the paper band and fanned the envelopes. He soon found the one that Helm had slit open. "*The Purloined Letter* by Edgar Allan Poe. If you really want to hide something, put it in plain sight." He waved the envelope at Avvi as if to say, 'So much for *you*, Mister Body-guard!'

"The cryostore isn't under the clinic, it's under the office block some distance away," said Helm.

"That I knew," said Morgenstern. "And if you know too, you must have been there. See how I check up on you? They let you have a look at it instead of giving you any money?"

"Something like that."

"See how easy it is to predict what a greedy man will do?"

"And you don't need to blow it up. All you have to do is drain the stuff out of the tanks and unfreeze the bodies."

"That I know as well. But we want to show these Nazis we can hit them hard wherever they are." Morgenstern crushed the life out of the remains of his herbal cigarette and let Avvi give him a light for another. "You know what I think? I think maybe you want to come with us."

Helm shrugged and topped up his glass, telling himself that not only misers are predictable. "I've got no experience as a commando. Or of blowing things up."

"You can leave that to us, Mister. You just show us how to get in and where to put the charges. We'll do the rest."

"And what happens then? I mean, the Nazis aren't going to like us blowing up their leader for the next millennium. They're going to want revenge."

"So you'll have to lie low for a while. If they don't find you, they can't touch you. The world is a big place, Mister. Grow a beard and get your hair cut. You go and drink more beer and read your book."

"I'd rather have coffee," Helm said, remembering his tired blood.

Helm went further along the corridor with Avvi. The second office looked comfortable enough with its deep carpet and well-padded armchairs. There were shutters on the windows – closed to keep intruders out or Helm in.

Avvi unplugged the telephone and took it with him. A dark-haired woman with a serious face took his place, bringing a tray with a cup and saucer, a vacuum jug of coffee and a camera. She wanted to take his picture for a passport. A key turned in the lock when she left the office.

Sigismund Morgenstern was another Phileros Makronotis, Helm decided. Both felt entitled to take over his life whenever it suited them. Being held incommunicado, somewhere in Zürich's business district, was worse than being imprisoned in Makronotis' villa. There was no Klara Amercott to keep him company in Zürich.

Helm read his book, visited the en-suite bathroom for a change of scene and drank coffee. The dark-haired woman brought him a further supply of coffee without feeling a need to say anything to him. Another man, a redhead with a more authentic American accent than Avvi's, brought a meal at six o'clock.

Dan took great delight in explaining how he had prepared such an excellent veal risotto on a camping stove in another of the offices. Helm let him drink the bottle of lager that came with the meal as a reward. He recalled that Dan had wielded a submachine gun during the ambush the previous evening but without Avvi's animosity.

Two hours later, Avvi escorted Helm down to a blue Renault in the courtyard. Sigismund Morgenstern was sitting in the back, wearing an impenetrable pair of wraparound dark glasses and looking like a Mafia gang-boss. Helm belted himself into the front passenger seat. He waited in vain for someone to start a conversation.

Darkness was closing in, bringing street lights to life. When they passed Clerment's department store, Helm realized that they were leaving the city to the north, on the airport road. They crossed the West German border without incident. Ten minutes later, they reached their destination. Helm knew from road signs that the small town was called Hüfingen.

Avvi stopped at a large detached house on the far side of town. Redhead Dan let them in. Morgenstern retired to the red glow in the sitting room. Avvi took Helm upstairs to a bedroom. The shutters on the window were closed and the telephone point was a bare socket.

"How long are we going to be here?" said Helm.

Avvi surprised him by looking at his diver's watch. "Two hours. We leave at eleven and attack at midnight."

"You mean it's tonight?" gaped Helm.

"Why the hell do you think we've been keeping you out of circulation?" mocked Avvi.

Helm shrugged. "I thought it was just routine messing me about."

Avvi put on a *macho man* grin. He was about Helm's age but shorter, heavier and a lot cockier. "We don't mess about. The Chief has been ready to go for a long time. All he needed was someone to take us in quietly."

Helm kicked off his shoes when he was alone and sprawled on the bed with his book. He finished it at twenty to eleven and put it on the

bedside unit. The book had been all right as a means of passing time but he couldn't see himself wanting to read it again. He could afford to buy as many new books as he could read now. Having the opportunity to consume any great number of them was a severe problem while he had assorted millionaires, and possibly his own body, trying to write him off.

Dan unlocked the bedroom door a few minutes later. He was wearing a big grin. "Saddle up, compadre. We're going to hit the trail. Want to hit the heads first?"

Helm descended to the sitting room via the bathroom. That window was shuttered too. The lights in the sitting room were white not red now, but they were still at a Scrooge wattage. Avvi and the dark-haired woman were pushing cartridges into long magazines for their Uzi sub-machine guns. Morgenstern lifted a hand to Helm in greeting.

"Hello, Mister Engineer. You're ready to strike a blow for freedom?"

"I feel a bit like someone about to go sky-diving without a parachute," said Helm.

"All taken care of. We have an Australian passport for you to sign, and an English driving licence. Plus your escape money. You can live on one hundred thousand dollars?"

"Bloody oath, cobber!" Helm dropped straight into character.

Morgenstern handed Helm a money belt. "Are we ready to go now?"

"You're going too?" frowned Helm.

"Mister, you think I'd miss such a blow for freedom?"

"I guess not." Helm had a quick look in the pockets of the money belt then buckled it on under his shirt. He caught an edge of a predatory glance from Avvi and wondered if his custody of the money might be fairly temporary. He had no means of arguing with a submachine gun.

He realized that hearing that Sigismund Morgenstern, the seventy-nine-year-old, pot-smoking invalid, was going along on the raid shouldn't have been a surprise. When he thought back to his conversation with Eva von Arlberg that afternoon, he realized that she was expecting Morgenstern to take part in his final battle with Nazism.

Dan gave him the Australian passport. Helm used his normal handwriting to sign his new name so that he wouldn't have any problems if he had to sign his name again in the future. Dan applied an embossing stamp that caught an edge of the signature to make it official. Helm tucked the completed passport and the driving licence into his money belt.

Two cars set off for Meersdorf at a brisk pace. Morgenstern and Dan led in a dark Mercedes. Helm, Avvi and the dark-haired woman followed in the Renault. Helm learned in passing that their driver was called Gail.

She was about Dan's age, mid-twenties, and she had very little to say for herself. She seemed to aim for a dark and dangerous image. The Uzi in her overlarge handbag confirmed to Helm that she was dangerous enough.

The two cars cruised through the night at the speed of the rest of the traffic when they reached a main road. They parked on a forest track about three-quarters of a mile from the main complex of the *Gletscher* Klinik. After a final weapon check, Avvi sprayed everyone with a large aerosol. The spray smelled of nothing in particular but Avvi was sure that it would make guard dogs lose interest in them immediately.

Helm wondered if the old man would be able to manage the long walk as they padded into the night, following spots of light from pen-torches. He soon discovered that making Morgenstern take the journey steadily was a bigger problem. The old man seemed ready to gallop to his final battle with the mythical enemy.

Gail's wire cutters made short work of a chain-link fence on the other side of the road. They crawled through a flap then tacked it back into position roughly with twists of wire. A dog did bark as they were sneaking through the trees, but it was a long way from them. They approached the office block from the side opposite the main building of the clinic.

Gail bridged alarm wires, then used her wire cutters again. Morgenstern slid nimbly over a windowsill and led the way across the office. Gail unlocked the door to let them across the office. Avvi and Dan sped silently up and down the corridor to make sure that the building was unoccupied.

"Eighty-one, five, five, nine," Helm muttered to himself, prodding at the keyboard beside the lift.

"Good, Mister," breathed Morgenstern when the doors opened.

Metal slithered on metal to cock the submachine guns in the descending lift. Helm stood and stared with his companions when the doors opened on the lower floor. Long red pennants with a black swastika in a white circle hung from ceiling to floor. Slogans in Gothic script wound round the walls. There were swastika flags among the vertical cylinders of frozen heads.

Morgenstern started to mutter to himself in Hebrew. Helm felt almost sorry for him. The old man was like a Roman Catholic confronted with the Devil – but Morgenstern had the means to demolish his personal demon. There was something different about the underground room, a fundamental structural change, but Helm couldn't pin-point it. He did notice that Avvi, Dan and Gail were looking shaken, however. None of them had expected Morgenstern to be right about the Nazi dormitory of frozen leaders for the next millennium.

Everyone else had two haversacks, which were slung from one shoulder to the opposite hip. Helm had been trusted with neither explosives nor a weapon. He trailed after Morgenstern as the others rushed to examine the cylinders. Four flags formed a square around one of the vertical cylinders. Black swastikas formed a continuous ring around the white circumference. Helm was wondering what *Führer befehl – wir folgen Dir!* meant when the doors closed and the lift began to rise to the surface.

Helm dived for cover behind the Führer's new bunker, hissing at the others. They took up ambush positions, Uzis at the ready. The lift doors opened again to reveal a woman in a black uniform with a swastika armband. The thick, black frames made her glasses look almost like goggles. She was speaking into a personal radio, which obscured the lower part of her face.

Helm caught a few words, which sounded almost like English, as the guard surveyed the cryostore from the doors of the lift. The woman's tone suggested that she was enjoying a joke with someone called Heinrich. Helm's inferior German vocabulary couldn't cope with the conversation.

"Alles in Ordnung," the woman said with brisk confidence, making a formal report before resuming her chat.

The lift doors closed. They opened again on the floor above after a brief episode of humming.

"Did she say 'Everything in order?'" Helm murmured to Morgenstern.

He nodded. "It was a routine check. So can we be out of here before the next one?"

Each of the haversack bombs had a digital counter in the fuse circuit. At Morgenstern's command, eight index fingers descended together on eight buttons. The counters began to flick down in seconds from 45:00. Planting the haversacks was a well-drilled manoeuvre.

Everyone had a copy of the diagram on Helm's envelope. Morgenstern himself planted a charge at the base of the Führer's cylinder. Then he dealt the gleaming, white surface a resounding kick. Helm winced in sympathy. The old man was wearing black-striped trainers for silent sneaking but he seemed not to feel any pain.

Helm was relieved when the lift descended in response to the security code. He had been starting to wonder if the von Arlbergs intended to trap the saboteurs in the cryostore, but everything seemed to be going to plan. A previously undisclosed part of Morgenstern's plan became clear when the group reached the office, through which it had entered the building.

The old man slid over the windowsill and went on ahead with Gail and Dan. Avvi and Helm remained behind to cover their rear. When the

three had disappeared beyond a belt of bushes, Avvi perched on a desk and rested his submachine gun on his shoulder with the magazine pointing at the ceiling.

"I don't think you've been playing straight with us," he snarled in his synthetic American accent. "So take that money belt off, Mister Engineer." He lifted the submachine gun a couple of inches and let it drop back to his shoulder, daring Helm to make a threatening move.

"Suppose you come and take it off me?" Helm said defiantly. "Start blasting with that thing and you'll have every guard in the place on your neck."

"Listen to the expert," mocked Avvi. "One shot in a closed building is all I need. No one will bother about that. Want to try it? You'll never know if I'm right."

"Don't bother." Helm unzipped his anorak, lifted his cashmere sweater and began to unbutton his shirt as slowly as he dared.

His involvement with the von Arlbergs and Sigismund Morgenstern had been one double-cross after another. There was no money in this job. He would be lucky to come out of it with his life. His best option seemed to be to throw the belt one way as a distraction and try to dive through a closed window and then run like hell for cover with Avvi blasting away at him.

As a life plan, it offered the virtual certainty of a quick death from lead poisoning as an alternative to the possibility of a slower death from his internal waxy lumps or whatever was causing his anaemia. It was some choice!

IS DID THE EARTH MOVE?

AS HE REACHED THE FOURTH shirt button, Helm caught a flash of motion with the corner of his eye. A small object slammed against Avvi's chest. He toppled backward. His Uzi roared, shredding lumps out of the suspended ceiling, exploding a light fitting. His submachine gun dropped from his hand, bounced on the desk and crashed onto Helm's foot.

"Come on, darling," said a familiar voice.

Helm snatched up the Uzi and rushed to the door. He caught a whiff of Eva von Arlberg's expensive perfume through burnt gunpowder as he burst out into the corridor. She reached up to drop a chain around his neck. A matchbox-size metal object bounced on his chest.

"Keep that on," Eva warned. "It tells our security system who is a friend. This way."

She seized Helm's hand and ran along the corridor to the nearer end. She tapped out a security code and dragged him through an emergency exit. As they ran away from the office annex, Eva shouted into her personal radio.

"What's that about?" panted Helm.

"I told the guards of at least one armed man in the offices. They may not approach within twenty metres. They must surround him and wait for the police."

The ground shivered under their feet, releasing a noise like buried thunder. Eva turned right to follow a hedge. A red fireball turned night to doomsday.

Eva dragged Helm through a gap in the hedge and into its shelter as Helm felt his hair crinkle in the wave of intense heat. Thunder mixed with sharper, crashing sounds bellowed nearby. Floodlights beyond another hedge restored daylight conditions.

Helm's throat had dried out. His breath rasped in and out. His depleted blood pounded round his system, working overtime to supply a ruthless demand for more and more oxygen. He could hear Eva

gasping too, but she kept running strongly, maintaining a firm grip on his hand. They turned a corner, and another. Then they were off grass and running across a flagged terrace. Eva tapped out a security code and dragged him through a plate-glass door.

They padded up a darkened staircase in the clinic's main building. Helm remembered that he hadn't wiped his feet and felt guilty about leaving dirty footprints on the carpet. Eva led him to a room on the second floor. She unlocked the door with trembling hands. She hauled him inside by his arm. Helm tripped after a few steps and fell onto something soft.

The Uzi bounced out of his hand. Eva landed beside him and rolled onto him. All they could do was lie in each other's arms, trying to get their breath back.

His throat felt sand-blasted, clogged and painful. Helm rolled Eva off himself and struggled to his feet.

"No lights," croaked Eva. "No one knows we are here."

There was enough light coming through the broad window for Helm to find the bathroom. He drank a full glass of cold water, splashed more water onto his face to dilute the sweat, dried himself with a handy towel and drank another full glass of water. Then he wondered if German water is safe for an Englishman to drink.

He took another glass of water and the other towel to Eva. She was lying on a squashy, circular object about seven feet in diameter. She drained the glass in three gulps and buried his face in the towel. Helm crossed to the window. He could see lights along the terrace below but no sign of activity.

"The explosion was on the other side," said Eva. "It was fantastic."

"What did you shoot that sod Avvi with?" said Helm.

"More water, darling."

Helm made another trip to the bathroom then sprawled on the circular couch. He was feeling exhausted.

"A stun gun," said Eva when she had drained the glass. "A little sandbag in a compressed air gun. It hits hard enough to knock someone out but leaves no mark."

"The computer!" Helm realized what had been different about the cryostore. "You moved it out."

"Darling, the thing is worth a quarter of a million dollars," chuckled Eva. "What did you think of the décor?"

"Absolutely brilliant! You must have spent ages on it. Is that the end of your collection of Nazibilia?"

"No, it was all film props."

"Aren't you worried some of it will be found?"

"Everything was treated with incendiary chemicals. They will have

gone up in smoke by now. And there was a liquid oxygen tank in the cryostore. It was convenient to keep it there, with all the refrigeration equipment.”

“That must have been the fireball.”

“The cryostore will be just a hole in the ground now. Listen, you can hear the sirens of the fire brigade. Saying *Feu'r-Wehr, Feu'r-Wehr*.”

Helm pressed the back-light of his watch. The time was 00:51. Sigismund Morgenstern had started his 45-minute timers at about half-past midnight. Helm concluded that the old Jew had been given a bigger and better bang sooner than expected.

Eva unzipped a long pocket on the thigh of her overall. She took out a black mop-head wig and a pair of black-rimmed glasses, which had broken at the bridge. She took a gun with a fat barrel out of the other thigh pocket.

“That was you with the black hair and the specs in the lift?” Helm realized. “They might have shot you.”

“Sieg heil, darling,” laughed Eva as she wriggled out of her overall. She was wearing the SS uniform under it. “Don’t you find danger stimulating?”

When she closed her mouth on his and guided his fingers to a zip, Helm realized what she meant about stimulating. He had read in paperbacks about women who are turned on by violence and danger. He had never expected to meet one – or to be seduced by the daughter of an Austrian count. Life was too short to pass the opportunity by and he had fancied Eva von Arlberg from the start. Fortunately for someone with tired blood, she was prepared to make all of the running.

Eva was asleep under a dark blue silk sheet when Helm woke in pre-dawn twilight for about the fifth time. He was having one of his nights of broken sleep. The time was five-thirty. Helm noticed the Uzi lying under a chair. He managed to remove the magazine and eject the round from the chamber. Then he put the weapon in the top drawer of an antique chest, out of sight.

He took his money belt and his anorak into the bathroom and wallowed in a hot bath for a quarter of an hour. He wasn’t going to take the chance of an acquisitive von Arlberg parting him from his money and his passports. His black, designer stubble looked scruffy rather than elegant but there was no razor in sight.

He found a knee-length, silk dressing gown – blue with a red dragon on the back – in one of the cupboards. Leaving the room’s door open, he explored the corridor until he found a communal sitting room on the other side. Two broad windows were cracked from top to bottom. Hedges and trees got in the way but he could see part of the angular

wreckage of the office block and a large, dark scar in the grass beyond. Fire engines and police cars were parked all over the place.

"Admiring your work?" said Eva with a yawn as she linked arms with him. She was wearing her blue overall and pink slippers. Her hair was a sleepy tangle.

"It's going to cost your old man a fortune for the windows."

"The insurance company will pay."

"How am I fixed for a lift to Zürich? My car and my luggage are there. I haven't even got a pair of clean socks."

"We can supply you. You will look sweet in swastika shorts and socks."

"You're kidding!"

"Yes," laughed Eva, "I am. Come on."

"So you don't get an urge to invade Poland when there's a full Moon?"

"I can think of dozens of less depressing countries to invade," scoffed Eva.

Helm made a list of his sizes. Eva made a telephone call from their room, then disappeared into the bathroom. Helm sat in a large armchair, facing the window. The door opened and closed behind him a few minutes later. The person who had made the delivery didn't need to know who was in the room. There was a rechargeable electric razor with his clothing. Eva had thought of everything.

Eva was delighted when Helm remembered the Uzi and presented it to her. Her father had refused to let her have a submachine gun. Acquiring one secretly without having to pay for it was a big thrill. Winning the weapon in battle made it an even more valuable collector's item.

Just before six o'clock, Eva turned out of the clinic's grounds and pointed the mid-range Audi toward Konstanz. She was wearing jeans with creases and a rather prim top of blue denim. The journey to Zürich took three-quarters of an hour at Eva's idea of a reasonable speed.

Helm gritted his teeth and paid a small fortune in parking fees to recover his BMW and his luggage. Eva led him to a select hotel, where they could enjoy free parking during a second, more substantial breakfast.

"Do you want to drive us to see Daddy?" Eva asked when they were waiting to be served with eggs and bacon.

"I don't think I want to see Daddy again," said Helm. "I think it's worth the ten grand of mine he's got in his safe not to get involved in another of his free jobs. The last one would have got me bloody well killed if you hadn't been on the ball."

"You'd walk away from ten grand, Johnny?"

"Yes, if it's likely to cost me Morgenstern's other ten grand to visit Castle Arlberg. It only costs three or four pounds to visit an English castle."

"And whatever else you have in your money belt?"

"You remember that?"

"Last night is very vivid in my memory," chuckled Eva.

Helm gave her a conspiratorial smile. He knew that he had enjoyed a jet-setter's one-night stand with the daughter of an Austrian count – which had to be an unrepeatable offer. He had to be mature about the whole business. He had no claim on Eva as a consequence. She was destined to be just a scary and delightful memory for his old age – if he had one. Living up to John Scott's image had a few compensations.

"So where are you going?" prompted Eva, pouring more coffee. The food arrived, as if on cue.

"Back to Athens, I guess." Helm dripped *HP* sauce onto his fried egg with a smile of appreciation for the gesture – the right sauce with the English breakfast. "To find out who's been sacked for the cock-up that gave me your mother's jewels instead of Tsai. I bet your mother's chewing the carpet. How do you get on with her?"

"We meet at parties sometimes. She tells me off for being a bad girl and getting my name in newspapers. Why am I not married like Astrid? Or a nice girl like dear little Helena? So I tell her, if I could have as many affairs as they say, I would be a wreck! I will not blame her for wanting to divorce Daddy. He is an old miser. But I am not nagged at home. Would you do a job for me? If you are going to Athens?"

Helm shrugged. "Why not? Is it something likely to get me killed?"

"You just have to sell some letters for me. At a shop in Molivi Street in the Monastiraki area, near the Hill of Ares. The man buys and sells Nazibilia."

"In the bazaar of Athens? How much do I ask for them? Are we talking hundreds of dollars?"

"Eight thousand dollars. Not one cent less."

"Phew, gov! Okay. Where are they?"

"I have to collect them from home."

"How long will that take?"

"Two and a half hours. You could put your feet up in my family's suite here and read your books."

"Do I get any commission on the deal?"

"No, darling, you do it for love."

"I should have seen that coming," grinned Helm. "From a von Arlberg. You couldn't crack your old man's safe while you're there? And rescue my ten grand? You can tell him I'm blackmailing you if he catches you."

"I wonder if I *could* open his safe?" laughed Eva.

Helm's flight touched down at Athens airport just after one o'clock. The advantage of having just hand luggage was that he avoided the wait for the airliner's baggage hold to be unloaded and the scrum around the carousel. He told the immigration officer that he was visiting Phileros Makronotis. He was waved through as an honoured, jet-setting guest – the sort of man who had just slept, on and off, with the daughter of an Austrian count after being involved in a major insurance swindle.

He paid 100 drachmas to ride into Athens on the airport bus. He walked round to a large bank a few doors down from the stock exchange. He showed the title page of his dictionary to one of the counter clerks and tapped the Greek for 'English'. She smiled and directed him to the other end of the counter with a red-nailed finger, which made him think of Klara.

He explained to a young man with glossy, black hair that he wanted to rent a deposit box for business papers. He cashed some traveller's cheques for operating expenses and to pay for the deposit box. His Australian identity – passport and UK driving licence – and \$115,000 remained in safe custody when he left the bank. His Australian name was Bruce Dundee.

It struck him as unlikely enough to be unchallengeable.

The Nazibilia dealer was called Thiroros. There was very little on show in his shop, just artfully draped purple velvet and a few books, none in languages that Helm could read. Thiroros looked at the letters, each sealed in a plastic wrapper, and offered \$2,000.

Helm had forced the price up to \$3,500 before he became bored with the bargaining process. He told Thiroros that someone else wanted to look at the letters, and added that he would be in touch again when the other potential customer had made his bid.

He added the letters to his deposit box at the bank and strolled down to Elousis Square and the Hotel Renga. The day was boiling hot, but there seemed to be enough of a breeze blowing to clear the photo-chemical smog. Athens was no place to be wearing a white cashmere sweater.

The receptionist at the hotel recognized the name Scott. Helm told him that he would wait for Mr. Makronotis in the bar. He had at least an hour and three-quarters in hand before chucking-out time at the stock exchange. Helm asked for a bottle of Heinken and a telephone, and told the barman to charge them to room 322, which he had occupied for less than half an hour a week earlier. Afternoon surgery at the health centre near Maidstone had not yet started. Helm mentioned that he was calling from Athens, which impressed the receptionist no end.

Dr. Bennett came on the line after a short pause. He wouldn't give a definite answer about the results on the second waxy lump. A telephone

consultation was inappropriate. Helm promised to catch a flight home as soon as possible. The receptionist gave him a nine-thirty appointment for the next morning.

His next call was to the airport. The next direct flight to London gave Phileros Makronotis a good four hours to find another job for him. Helm drained his glass and returned to the reception counter. He wrote another note explaining where in Zürich he had left the BMW and its keys, and added that he had to go home to see his doctor. Then he told the receptionist that there had been a change of plan as he handed over the note.

There were deep shadows on his side of Elousis Square. He walked briskly round to the main road before flagging down a taxi. The driver blasted him with heavy metal rock music all the way to the airport. There was a half empty Al Italia flight leaving for Rome in twenty minutes. Helm bought a first-class, one-way ticket with a thousand-dollar bill, which was accepted without surprise by a charming blonde with a ready smile.

Helm jet-setted to London via Frankfurt and Paris. Hiring a car seemed the simplest way of getting home from Heathrow. He felt like doing something active, like driving, after sitting on airliners and in airports for five hours. He reached Maidstone at half-past eight, B.S.T. He collected fish and chips with proper malt vinegar on the way home. A week's mail lay in the hall, none of it of any great interest. He glanced at it while he ate his supper. Then he went straight to bed.

He was no longer surprised by the lack of nightmares full of accusing faces of dead men. It was proof that a normal person can kill and feel either that he took the right decision for the circumstances, or admit to himself that events were beyond his control.

He could live with the way things had turned out. There was no point in agonizing over the past, at either a subconscious or a conscious level, because he had no power to change it. He could also tell himself that if the waxy lumps ever got him, he had taken a few deserving characters along with him.

When he took his iron capsule the next morning with a breakfast of tea and toast, he realized that he had been free of the symptoms of constipation. That had to be due to either the slow release of ferrous sulphate from the micro-capsules or to achieving a balance between the iron's binding effect and adventures calculated to scare the shit out of the average man.

Dr. Bennett was recovering from a cold. His dripping nose made him reach regularly for a box of man-size tissues. He looked positively unhealthy next to tanned but blue-lipped Robert Helm. Bloodshot eyes

was something else that he would remain free from in his anaemic condition, Helm realized.

His doctor had news that was both bad and good. There was evidence of malignancy in the second waxy lump but the consultant was reasonably confident that she had removed all of the tumour. Dr. Bennett wanted Helm to have a body scan to make sure that he had no more visible rotten bits. The results from the second series of blood tests had yet to arrive. The lab wasn't known for its speed.

A cancellation had provided Helm with an eleven o'clock appointment at the hospital. He left home with a book and his building society passbook. He wanted to see if the printer could fit a six-figure number into the space provided. He just stared at the book when the clerk slid it back under the security screen after bringing it up to date.

"Something wrong, Mr. Helm?" she asked when he remained in front of her, blocking the queue.

Helm pushed the book back to her, feeling like a pools winner who has been told that his big pay-out was a mistake. The next man in the queue drew in a heavy breath and let it out between clenched teeth. Helm ignored him. He was prepared to inconvenience a whole roomful of impatient customers for £100,000. The clerk gave him another smile when she returned to her till.

"It was your Telex from Corinth, Mr. Helm. We transferred the money according to your instructions."

"What Telex?" said Helm.

"From Corinth. In Greece."

"I know where it is. I've just never bloody well been there. Hang on. You did say Corinth?"

"Yes," said the clerk. "Is there something wrong?"

"We'll see about that," said Helm grimly.

He stuffed the passbook back into his wallet and strode to the door. He had been stalking along the streets, fuming about the antics of the bastard Roger Gladwin, for five minutes before he realized that he was going the wrong way for the hospital.

Phileros Makronotis had responded to his disappearing act in Athens by taking Helm's capital into protective custody. Worse, striking at Helm's building society account meant that he knew John Scott's real identity. Even worse, £500 of the sequestered £100,000 was Helm's own money as opposed to his earnings from Makronotis.

The receptionist at the scanner unit looked ready to duck when she told Helm that his appointment had been put back to twelve-thirty. A man who had just lost £100,000 could accept the delays of the NHS without flinching and without having to take a swipe at the bearer of bad tidings. Helm just nodded and walked right out again.

He walked down King Street and headed back to High Street. He gave the building society office a black look as he walked past on the other side of the street. Then he came to the renovated, red-brick building that housed the offices of Lancer and Stowe. A stranger – early twenties with a vaguely lost look – was sitting at his desk when Helm looked into the main office area.

His workmates looked as if they had seen a ghost. During a few minutes' embarrassed conversation, they told him that he looked well enough and wished him well for the future. Helm's long absence from the office and the tension in his manner seemed to confirm that his condition was very serious indeed, despite outward appearances.

Helm continued on down the corridor to Edward Stowe's office. Mrs. Brion, the sentinel secretary, announced the ghost and waved him through to the junior partner's office.

"Bob! You're looking . . . well," Edward Stowe told him through a brisk hand-shake. He saw a Robert Helm who was tanned, healthy and downcast by bad news. "How are things?"

"Once the Health Service gets you in its clutches, you get to think they've got you for life," said Helm. "All the bloody tests drag on and on."

"They're not finished with you yet?"

"The doctor's still waiting for the blood test results to tell him why I'm so anaemic. And they're shoving me in the body scanner to look for rotten bits. It's the scanner Carol shamed everyone in the office into contributing ten pounds to the appeal fund for. Remember that?"

"Looks like it was worth it, in your case. When are they doing it?"

"Sometime today, if they can get their appointments sorted out."

"You look like you've been out in the sun."

"I thought getting out and about might take my mind off things. I see you managed to fill my desk."

"The work was piling up," Stowe said apologetically.

"That's fair enough," said Helm. "I think it might be best for all concerned if I take a long break. I've got a bit put by." If that sod Makronotis hasn't found my deposit box in Athens, he added to himself.

"You mean a leave of absence?"

"I was thinking more of giving my notice. It takes a bit of time to come to terms with the possibility you might not need a pension. And even if it's a false alarm, well, it's shown me there are some thing I ought to be doing while I've got the chance. And if you've already got someone else to take over from me . . ."

"It's not too fair on you, though, Bob. After a good few years with us."

"That's a very decent thought," said Helm, "but as our gym master at school used to say, there's nothing fair in life. But whatever happens, I'll

be all right.”

Stowe agreed to accept his resignation with effect from the last pay day, August 25th, which meant that Helm had been self-employed for a fortnight. He promised to drop a formal letter of resignation into the post and left the offices of Lancer & Stowe for the last time.

He sat and read a paperback in the hospital's waiting room until a quarter to one, trying not to think about the real world. He was jobless and in a hole for £100,000. But he still had his health – until some medical fiend broke more bad news.

He was in two minds about the scan. It suggested to him that there was a real possibility of travelling cancers lodging in his bone marrow and causing his anaemia. He wasn't looking forward to becoming involved in a messy illness, perhaps one for which the treatment was much worse than the early stages of the disease. He still felt all right and his iron capsules were as much medicine as he wanted. With any luck, he was just scaring himself with maybes. On the other hand, he had the luck of someone who had almost been blown to bits three times in eight days.

This consultant was a mature woman with dark red hair and bright red earrings. She had what Helm considered a posh Scottish accent. He had come to the conclusion that the NHS is largely a female domain. He had a male doctor, but he had sent Helm to see female radiographers, surgeons and scanner experts. And all of the administrators seemed to be women, too.

The actual scan was painless and totally boring. Helm lay still on a long tray and allowed himself to be pushed into a white tunnel in the magic doughnut of a five-ton electromagnet. Microwaves bombarded him. Every proton in his body – the hydrogen atoms in water, fats, proteins and friendly and enemy cells – spun to align its magnetic field with the electromagnet's.

Helm had expected to feel some effect of either the atomic twitching or a magnetic force ten thousand times stronger than that of the Earth. The only indication that anything was happening came from the weird noises. At times, it was like being next door to Ben Hur's chariot race in stereo. At other times, there was a monotonous ticking like a sonic Chinese water torture.

The whole business had an air of unreality. Helm began to suspect that the Scottish doctor and the nurse were laughing at him for putting up with a pointless joke for so long. He spent fifty minutes in the tunnel, gazing at the Disney characters above his head. They told him that the otherwise featureless white arch was closer than the sky. Distance tended to lose its meaning after a while in the tunnel.

He had no means of checking on time passing because the nurse had

relieved him of his watch. She had also run a through checklist of bodily metal articles – pacemakers, plates, screws, steel pins, artificial joints and metal heart valves. Robert Helm had never needed anything in that line but he felt that John Scott seemed destined to need a few plates, screws and pins before Phileros Makronotis was finished with him. He mentioned his breakfast iron capsule but that didn't count.

Helm left the hospital as the inevitable computer was chewing over the results of his scan. He bought a hot Cornish pasty at the patisserie on King Street and went for a look at the shopping centre while he thought about strategy. Step one took him back to the building society to open a high-interest account, which required ninety day's notice of withdrawals – a new home for his £100,000 if he ever got it back.

He kept his back traveller's cheques and a cash reserve, then he unloaded a mixture of sterling, dollars, drachmas and Swiss francs in front of the astonished assistant manager. There was more than enough to cover the minimum deposit required. Helm told the assistant manager that he would pick up the new passbook when the sterling equivalent of his deposit had been calculated, and made a note of the new account number. Then he put step two of his plan into action. He went home to wait for Roger Gladwin to show up.

England is a cold, grey place after Greece, he decided as he completed the ten-minute walk. His home country had one distinct advantage, however. He would move about it on foot without becoming drowned in sweat.

Helm sensed a presence as soon as he opened the front door. He could hear hushed voices and the click of snooker balls. Gladwin was sitting with his feet up, watching Helm's television. He had brought his own beer.

"Comfortable?" said Helm sarcastically.

"Where the hell have you been?" Gladwin kept his eyes on the screen. "You were sent off on a simple job on Monday. What the hell did you do that took three days?"

"I had a body scan, for one thing."

"And?"

"And the computer's thinking about what the machine told it. Who cocked up the delivery and gave me the real jewels?"

Gladwin shrugged. "These things happen."

"A hazard of being too diabolical?" Helm knew that Gladwin was lying. The casual treatment of the package after its collection from the bank proved that the pick-up man had known that Tsai would have the fakes.

"Erich got his German arse roasted," laughed Gladwin. "But the jewels didn't belong to the boss. His little girl put up a spirited defence

of you costing her thumb at nine point five million bucks.”

“You reckon Tsai would have told the Count, ‘Screw you, do your worst,’ if it had been me about to get chopped up?”

“She’s quite a little fanatic in her own way. Where were you when von Arlberg’s clinic went up in smoke?”

“Where’s my hundred grand?” countered Helm.

“It’s quite safe,” grinned Gladwin. “The boss told me to make sure you come back to Athens. I reckon you will now.”

“I want my cash back before I answer any more questions. Or get on any planes.”

“Or?” grinned Gladwin.

“I learned not to bother with ‘or’ over the last couple of days. Let’s just say certain people might not enjoy my next move if we do have to go to ‘or’.”

“I do believe the lad’s starting to get the hang of this business. Hey, what a brilliant pot!”

“Pity he’s not on any of the colours.” Helm sat down and helped himself to one of Gladwin’s cans of lager, letting the older man know that the next move was up to him.

Gladwin made two international telephone calls while the referee was resetting the table between frames. The missing money reappeared and moved to Helm’s new, predator-proof account, and Phileros Makronotis gave him a personal assurance that he would have the power of veto on all future jobs. Significantly, Makronotis continued to call him ‘Mr. Scott’, which suggested that Helm’s real identity remained Gladwin’s secret.

Looking at his position realistically, Helm was prepared to admit that he had made the best bargain possible. The billionaire still wanted revenge for his granddaughter’s kidnapping. Someone who might be able to identify the criminals stood no chance of being allowed to walk out of the Greek’s life after offering his grateful thanks for past opportunities to risk his life.

When the snooker session ended, Helm unplugged his television, collected his repacked and waiting cabin bag, and drove the hire car back to London with Gladwin as a passenger.

Another endless trek south, via Frankfurt this time, brought him back to the familiar bustle of Athens airport for the umpteenth time. An over-officious customs officer rummaged through his cabin bag as if to prove that he wasn’t overawed by the name Makronotis. The official barely glanced at Gladwin, proving that he was a hypocrite.

“Ya anemia,” said Helm, using a Greek word to tell the customs man what his spansules were for.

The official looked at the front and back of the box, took the part-used blister pack out and looked at Helm. Then, with a nod of

agreement, he dropped the box back into the bag. Helm was irrationally outraged. In his opinion, his lightly tanned self no longer looked like one of Count Dracula's empties.

A car was waiting for Gladwin and Helm outside the terminal building. It sped through the deep night to drop Gladwin in Athens on the way to the Makronotis villa, arriving at 11:30, local time. Klara appeared at the front door to escort Helm up to his room, full of questions about what he had been up to. They had the place to themselves, apart from a few servants. Tsai was on assignment somewhere and Phileros Makronotis was holding a party at his hotel in the city.

When he had dumped his cabin bag, Klara took Helm down to the ground-floor sitting room. An open bottle of Barsac was waiting for them. Helm resumed his edited highlights of a desperate campaign to save the world from a resurgence of Nazism in the twenty-first century.

Klara hung on his every word, which was a very flattering experience. They were sitting on a couch, half-turned to face each other. Sympathetic body language drew them closer and closer, allowing Helm to relate what was criminal behaviour in an intimate murmur.

Gladwin had mentioned on the flight from Frankfurt how Klara had been pining for Tsai. Helm had tried to create the impression of going along with a joke while knowing from the start that it had been just a joke. Now, he was starting to wonder if he and Klara might be on the verge of a deep and meaningful relationship, which would have all the intensity packed into brief duration of a wartime romance. As an associate member of the private army run by Phileros Makronotis, he had not yet ceased to flirt with violent death.

The couch shifted, making them bump foreheads. Helm grabbed for support, and found himself holding both the back of the couch and Klara's knee. "Sorry." He released the knee reluctantly. "Did the earth just move for you?"

"It's just a deep tremor," said Klara knowledgeably. "We've been getting them for a couple of days. They release tension and stop a big earthquake building up. That's what a guy from the university said on TV. What happened after the SS guard got back in the lift?"

Helm resumed his story with the planting of the bombs and Avvi's attempt to rob him. He was skirting tactfully around Eva von Arlberg's passionate reaction to their adventure when he heard a sound like distant, buried thunder.

He had just enough time to realize that the noise reminded him of the eruption at the *Gletscher* Klinik. Then the earth moved in earnest and the ceiling came down.

16. PAST EXCURSION

AN UNKNOWN TIME LATER, the cement mixer stopped churning. Helm lay in a daze, unable to collect his thoughts. His legs hurt. Something soft and warm pinned them down. There was so much dust in the air that he had to keep his mouth shut and hope that his nose didn't become completely blocked. He was in profound darkness. His first clear thought was that it was Thursday – not Tuesday, the proper day for a Greek earthquake.

Helm felt around with his hands. There was a hard, smooth surface on the left, padded cloth on the right and a yielding, female body ahead. Klara's gasp suggested that his hand had found an embarrassing area, but it proved that she was alive, awake and not in any great pain. Helm's automatic apology degenerated into throat-tearing coughs.

There was nothing overhead. Then his waving hand met a rough, timber beam. The beam shifted. Dust sifted down, adding to the raw, grittiness of his eyes. Something slithered then broke with a crash. Helm withdrew his hand at once. His watch showed twenty-five past midnight when he remembered to press the back-light button.

"John?" Klara began to cough wretchedly as soon as she spoke

Not being able to communicate was frustrating. Helm tried to speak but his throat was too clogged. He gave a reassuring pat to what he hoped was a non-embarrassing area while he tried to think of something to do.

His surroundings began to make sense. He was lying on his back on a hard floor with a wall on his left. The couch had gone over on its back. Everything in the room above had dropped into his room. The timber beam resting on the upturned couch had to be a ceiling joist. Klara was pinning his legs down but his left foot was also trapped, turned outwards at right angles.

The floor shuddered under him. Wreckage shifted, crashing down and down. More dust billowed into the air. Helm's left foot came free suddenly. Klara gasped with pain as his knee drove into her body. Helm

put his hand behind his head to grab something that was butting him, rolling away and butting him again with each slight tremor.

The cold, metallic object had a ring pull. An agitated can of lager exploded foam into his face, washing some of the grit out of his eyes. He was able to settle the dust in his throat then tell Klara of his find. After some groping, her hand found his and she was able to take a much-needed drink.

"If this is just a deep tremor, I'd hate to be caught in a full bloody earthquake." Helm realized that he was whispering for no good reason.

"Are we going to die, John?" Klara cut straight to an important issue.

"Not today," Helm said with false confidence. "Are you hurt?"

"Nothing broken, but my eyes are full of dust. You?"

"The same. I'm in the embarrassing position of hoping the wet patch on my leg is only blood. It reminds me of when I got blown up with Tsai."

"Blood?"

"It's wine," Helm said quickly, remembering Klara's profound aversion to spilled blood. "I was topping up the glasses when the roof came down, remember? I got the bloody lot in my lap."

"This place is supposed to be earthquake-proof."

"Makronotis wants to get his money back. Still, he's got a chance to spend some of his zillions on improving the original design."

"What can we do, John?"

"See if we can get out, or wait to be dug out. I think we'd better try and get out if the place is going to keep shaking."

"How?"

"See if you can move to your left, up against the wall."

The pressure moved off Helm's legs. There was no way out at his head. Unstable wreckage had piled up there, sealing their shelter. Helm picked his way beyond the couch the other way, struggling over sharp lumps in a wedge-shaped tunnel formed by a wall, the floor and a collapsed ceiling. He came to another impenetrable barrier within a couple of feet, touching it gingerly in case it collapsed in on top of him. Feeling his way back along the wall, he found a door.

He used his feet to push rubble away. Nothing happened when he turned the handle and pulled gently. A lump of plaster dropped onto his shoulder when he pulled harder. The frame creaked ominously. The door opened about two inches, then jammed. He managed to slide a two-foot length of timber out of the wreckage to use as a lever.

Klara helped him to force the door open about a foot, gasping in the rain of bits. There was just enough room to slide into the hall like a vertical limbo dancer. The villa was an octagonal structure of two storeys. The hall had a shallow, glass dome over the large, central space.

That dome lay in pieces on the marble-mosaic floor. Most of the dust had settled and there was enough starlight for Helm and Klara to pick their way to the front door.

"Don't touch it," warned Helm when Klara reached for the latch. "That door might be all that's holding the wall up. We'll break the rest of the glass out and go through that window beside it."

"Listen!" said Klara. "Is that a car?"

"Hello! Anyone hear me?" shouted Helm.

"What are you doing?" said Klara.

"The servants. We've not heard from any of them. Do you know where they were?"

"Not really."

"Let's get out and see what they've brought in the way of rescue gear." Helm found himself playing the man of action as if born to the role.

Apart from the broken windows, the villa looked more or less intact from the front. Part of the boundary wall on the left had collapsed but the gate looked as solid as ever. Headlights approached at speed. There were two vehicles, a van and a taxi. Helm and Klara waved to them from the gap in the wall.

Half a dozen men trotted over from the vehicles with torches and electric lanterns. Klara began to talk to them in Greek, gesturing toward the villa. The rescue party surrounded them in what seemed like an entirely natural way. Then one grabbed Klara's arms from behind. Another placed the muzzle of a pistol to Helm's left temple.

He watched in amazement as a third man uncapped a loaded hypodermic syringe and drove the contents into Klara's arm. She screamed. The man slapped her face. She started to struggle but sagged slowly. Two of the gang carried her through the gap in the wall.

The man with the syringe returned it to a box and took out another loaded syringe. Another man grabbed Helm's arms and twisted them behind his back before the pressure of the gun against his head relaxed. He tried to twist out of the way as the needle stabbed through his shirt. A biting pain made him gasp.

Grinning, the man with the syringe dropped it, empty, into his box. The man behind him released Helm's arms and pushed him forward onto his face on the rough grass. The rest of the gang grabbed an arm or a leg apiece and lugged him back through the gap in the wall, face down.

To his surprise, Helm remained conscious. Pain continued to stab his left arm, and also his right leg, as if in sympathy. The gang carried him through the open front door of the villa, crunching through the glass in the hall to the first room on the left. They dropped him on the floor.

Then they began to pile pieces of wreckage onto him. He could see one of Klara's feet projecting from another untidy heap.

The gang moved into other parts of the villa. One voice directed the others in tones accustomed to obedience. Helm had heard that voice before. It had a gruff, lisping quality and it belonged to an English-speaking Greek crook, the surviving leader of the gang of bogus Arab terrorists, who had kidnapped Sophia Makronotis ten days earlier.

Helm was almost sure that he had also seen the character with the syringes then – a long-nosed, hollow-cheeked, malevolent creature with all the charm of a vampire bat.

Hammering started, steel on steel. Boots crunched constantly through the glass in the hall. Helm lay still when a man with a lantern entered his room. The man left with two paintings. The scheme became clear to Helm.

About an hour had gone by since the main destructive shock of the earthquake. Allowing twenty-five minutes to sprint across the peninsula from the Athens area, the leader had taken about half an hour to pick himself up, gather his gang and make plans to plunder the Makronotis villa or any other unprotected retreat. If the police or Dieter Erlich's security force turned up in the meantime, they had conveniently unconscious victims to rescue.

The idea seemed too well worked out to be hatched on the spur of the moment. Helm realized that the local criminals had devised a plan for taking advantage of an earthquake while the so-called academic experts had been dismissing the series of minor shocks as just harmless deep tremors. It was a clear case of academics, nil – bad guys, one.

Helm started to move lengths of wood and slabs of plaster-board off himself. Crashes from elsewhere in the villa, and the steel-on-steel hammering of what sounded like an assault on a safe, covered any noise that he made. Klara was limp and deeply unconscious. Helm managed to open a window and drape her across the sill.

He climbed out of the room. After a little experimentation, he managed to sling Klara on his shoulders in a fireman's lift. Two men with loot trotted to the gap in the wall, following puddles of torchlight. Helm's watch slithered from 00:54 to 01:06 before they made the next trip. He was nerving himself for a sprint across the courtyard at 01:09 when the men made another trip to and from their van.

Helm waited three minutes, then he decided to chance his luck. Klara was becoming quite heavy. He was breathless from a combination of tired blood and sheer tension when he reached the treacherous rubble at the gap in the wall.

He put Klara down beside the taxi and tried the door. Light exploded inside. The interior lighting was blinding. It showed him that there was

no key in the ignition.

He closed the door quickly when light splashed out through the gap in the wall. More loot clattered into the back of the van. Helm sneaked over to look for the ignition key. He sagged with relief when he spotted it. With reckless speed, he loaded Klara into the back, closed the doors and dived behind the wheel.

The engine started immediately with a healthy roar. Helm raced through the gears, trying for a drag-racer's start. He was still on a straight stretch of road when lights reached the shattered wall. He could see flashes in his mirror. Bullets slashed across the back of the van. Helm ducked instinctively – and almost ran off the road. Then he was charging into a left turn with his tyres screaming on the long 'S' that leads round a hill to the port of Rafina.

He had to stop sharply at a T-junction. A solid line of traffic was rushing toward Athens along the middle of the road. He looked to his right and wondered why he couldn't see Rafina. He was starting to think that the town had been destroyed utterly when he realized that the broken patchwork of fixed and moving lights was Rafina.

The electricity supply had failed. He could see moving vehicles and fixed lights at the premises of anyone far-sighted enough to have bought a generator.

His original plan had been to head for Rafina but he realized that finding someone inclined to speak a foreign tongue in the middle of a disaster area would be a tall order, and his Greek translator was flopping about limply in the back of his stolen van. Guiltily Helm resolved to drive more carefully to spare Klara's bruises.

When he spotted a slight gap, Helm bullied his way into the westward stream, blowing his horn furiously and pretending that he was an Italian taxi driver. Going to Athens seemed the best idea if everyone else was heading in that direction. His fellow motorists seemed too shocked to go in for aggressive driving. Helm found that he could weave faster than the general speed of the refugees and overtook to right or left, wherever the wider gap lay.

He was out of the zone of darkness suddenly. Every house in a small village was showing lights. The traffic thinned. People were heading off down side roads, as if on their way to pre-selected stable areas, or getting away from buildings or anything else that could fall on them. Helm recognized the turn-off to Koropi in the south. He was eleven and a half kilometres from the centre of Athens now.

He missed not being able to switch on the radio to hear what was going on, to get information on areas to avoid and how bad the earthquake had been. Major damage seemed to be confined to the east coast of the peninsula but a dark night could hide any amount of

devastation.

Flashing lights, policemen and soldiers were all over the place on the edge of Athens. A ratty apartment building had folded itself across the main road. The diversion took Helm onto an unfamiliar road. He had an idea of the approximate direction to take, however. Another diversion around a burst water main threw him off track completely.

Eventually, he found himself driving past the stock exchange building. He was able to set a direct course for Elousis Square then. The attendant jumped into his path when he tried to drive down the side of the Hotel Renga to the car park.

Helm said, "Kirios Makronotis?" and pointed to the hotel building. He pointed to himself then back to the hotel.

After a torrent of Greek from the attendant, and much pointing, Helm established that Mr. Makronotis was no longer at the hotel. He also realized that the car park attendant came from that part of the country where an upward nod of the head means 'no'.

Helm asked for Kirios Erlich. He was out too. The attendant just shrugged when he asked for Thespinis Yuan-lin. In desperation, Helm asked for Kirios Gladwin. The attendant pointed to the hotel to indicate that Gladwin was there. Helm mimed making a telephone call and produced a 1,000-drachma note as a bribe worth about £4.

Gladwin sounded unusually cheerful on the phone. He approached the van unsteadily, and he had to lean against it to stand without swaying, but he soon got things moving when Helm had told his tale. Klara was whisked up to the third floor in a wheelchair. Someone went to drag the doctor out of bed. One of the security staff took the vanload of loot into protective custody.

Helm left Gladwin sending a rescue party to the villa. He was sure the thieves were long gone, perhaps even with the contents of the safe that they had been trying to crack, but there were the servants to find. In the absence of orders to the contrary, he made his way up to room 322, which was still unlocked.

Helm got the shock of his life when he saw himself in a full-length mirror in the bathroom. He looked like a ghost. White plaster dust was stuck to all exposed flesh. His clothes looked bleached. His hair was stiff with what looked like terminal dandruff. He ponged like a wino. He pulled his clothes off and stepped into the shower.

He had been wondering if the crooks had injected him with saline solution by mistake. He found two angry, red marks on his upper arm and he could see two small bloodstains on his shirt. His wriggling had caused the needle to strike his arm at an angle instead of head-on. The needle had gone through a fold of flesh and the drug had squirted harmlessly onto his shirt. He had solved a mystery but his arm still hurt

like hell. So did his right leg, which had a two-inch gash in the calf.

The doctor thought that Klara would wake up in a few hours and feel no ill effects. As a precaution, he took Helm's dusty shirt to a laboratory to see if he could find out which drug had been used. The power of the Makronotis billions could persuade a technician to work in the early hours of a Friday morning, even on an earthquake day.

Gladwin told Helm that the boss had moved his party to his yacht in Piraeus. Gladwin and a ladyfriend, a journalist based in Periyali, had been enjoying their own private party in his room. The earthquake shocks had rattled light fittings in strongly built structures in Athens, but no one had been concerned and everyone knew that the villa was earthquake-proof.

Gladwin had not believed Helm's wild story until he had seen Helm's scruffy condition in a good light. His journalist friend had disappeared in search of an exclusive at the villa.

Helm found himself yawning and moving slower and slower. It was two o'clock in the morning and he had been through a long and traumatic day. His tired blood was packing up on him because it had had more than enough to do.

Feeling clean all over after his shower, and not liable to start gushing sweat in his air-conditioned room, he change from a dressing gown into a pair of blue silk pyjamas, which he found in the chest of drawers in his room, and crawled into bed at the end of a busy day. The state of his health was still anybody's guess a month after the shock of his first X-ray. He had been zapped with microwaves, he had lost and recovered £100,000, he had travelled about 1,700 miles, a villa had fallen on him and he had cheated death to outsmart a gang of dangerous crooks.

John Scott had crammed more drama into a single day than Robert Helm would have expected in a lifetime. He felt utterly worn out. He was asleep in less than an hour.

A man with a kinked nose and a blond crewcut woke Helm the next morning. Of course, he had to shake Helm's left arm, reviving the pain of the botched injection. Helm took a swipe at him and fired off some highly personal observations. Dieter Erlich, the local security advisor, ignored Helm's bad temper and told him to get up.

Helm yawned, rubbed crusted eyes and groped for his watch on the bedside unit. It was seven-thirty. The strap gleamed at him. Someone had cleaned and polished the stainless steel watch and matching strap during the night. There was a complete set of clothes draped on a bedside chair. The tailor had found him another white suit.

Erlich showed up again as Helm was admiring his new suit in a full-length mirror. Helm asked about Klara and the servants at the villa.

Klara was still asleep and the servants were safe. Erlich took him down the corridor to room 310, the small conference room. No breakfast was on offer and his iron capsules were still in the wreck of the villa. Helm was told to remove his jacket, roll up his shirt sleeve and pay attention.

"This is Dr. Karmaniola, the hotel doctor," said Erlich. "He'll give you an injection, then Professor Archard will take over."

"What the hell for?" said Helm rebelliously.

"An experiment in hypnotic regression," said Professor Archard, a short, untidy man with wild, grey hair and half-moon spectacles. He had a west-coast American accent, which made Helm start thinking *California quack* right away. "The doctor will give you an injection to relax you but you will remain conscious at all times. We hope to obtain drawings from you of the men you saw at the villa last night."

"But I can't draw for toffee," Helm protested.

"Can we just get on with this?" said Erlich. "You can bitch about it afterwards, okay?"

Helm thought about resistance, but he knew that he was outnumbered and surrounded, and that he would lose the argument. He took his jacket off and rolled up his right shirt sleeve, hoping that the doctor knew his business.

Dr. Karmaniola was in his thirties, about Helm's age, dark and plump, and he looked as if he had done well out of treating minor diseases of the rich. He wiped Helm's arm with antiseptic and popped in an entirely painless injection high on his upper arm. Helm gave him a nod of approval.

The last thing that he was sure about was hearing Professor Archard telling him to relax for the umpteenth time. The doctor had gone and two hours had slipped by before he became aware of his surroundings again. He was holding a 6B pencil. There was a sketch pad on the conference table before him.

Erlich made him look through the sketches, which Helm himself had made, apparently while hypnotized. He recognized three of the faces. He had seen two of the men carrying loot to the van. The third had the thin face and vicious grin of the maniac with the box of hypodermics. Helm turned to Professor Archard for an explanation.

"In theory, hypnotic regression is supposed to take the subject way back beyond birth to previous lives, which seem to be accessible somehow in deep memory," said the professor, striding up and down beyond the conference table, gripping his right lapel and making appropriate gestures with his left hand while he delivered the lecture.

"In practice, nobody is entirely sure what happens. What we do know is the drawings you made at first, as your own self under my direction, were terrible. The regression technique uncovered a young, educated

man of about your present age living in England in the 1860s. I understand your parents are from Southern Ireland, Mr. Scott? Do you have any relatives called Elm living in Southern England?"

Helm shrugged, preserving security. "I couldn't say."

"The personality was called Peter Elm. He worked as a clerk and he had an interest in natural history. He was by no means a great artist, but becoming a competent draughtsman was a social grace in those days for a certain class of person."

"How could a hypothetical, eighteenth-century personality draw men I saw last night?" challenged Helm.

The professor shrugged. "Research into the phenomenon is still at the evidence-gathering stage. It's too early to draw any firm conclusions. But you can hardly deny the quality of the drawings you produced."

Someone tapped on the door. One of the staff entered, pushing a trolley.

"Your breakfast," said the professor. "I'll leave you to enjoy it in peace."

There was a neatly folded copy of that morning's *Times* on the tray. Helm studied the front page and ate scrambled eggs on toast with grilled tomatoes and mushrooms, confident that the Hotel Renga didn't serve its third-floor guests with eggs laced with salmonella. He made the coffee last through the interesting parts of the paper.

He met a maid with an armful of towels on the way back to room 322. He asked for Thespinis Amercott with an inquiring look. The maid directed him to room 320. Helm picked up what sounded like *eeepnos* in her reply. It started him thinking about hypnotism and had to mean 'sleep'.

His dusty garments of the night before had disappeared but he found the contents of his pockets on the bedside cabinet in his room. The cleaning operation had included the inside of his wallet. There was not a scrap of dust or fluff inside. Even the gunk in the transparent credit-card pockets had been cleaned out. And all the money had been ironed nice and flat.

Nobody attempted to stop him when he left the hotel. The plan of the cryostore with Eva von Arlberg's incriminating hand-written comments, posted in Zürich on Tuesday, was waiting for him at the main post office. He added it to his deposit box in the bank near the stock exchange.

Klara was up and about when he got back to the hotel. She was reading a Greek newspaper in a sitting room and finishing her breakfast coffee. Helm enjoyed a hero's welcome, which blew away any remnants of Gladwin's slander. Klara was definitely one hundred per cent hetero, he was pleased to confirm. And she definitely fancied him. Over more

coffee, he filled in details of their adventure the previous night. Then it was Klara's turn to provide the translator's edition of what the papers had to say for themselves.

The earthquake's epicentre lay in the sea, just off Petalioi Island. The quake had knocked down a dozen or so buildings in Rafina, but most of the damage had been caused by a seismic sea wave, which had rushed ashore as a thirty-foot wall of water, flooding every cellar and basement and short-circuiting the power and telephone systems.

Phileros Makronotis had had his earthquake-proof villa built on a section of cliff, which had turned out to contain an internal structural flaw. The terrace at dungeon level was now under water, along with the rear part of the court-yard and the back wall of the villa. Two of the servants had been found in a front cellar room, playing cards by candle-light and three-quarters drunk.

One of the security guards had been taking a coffee break. He had managed to dive under a substantial kitchen table just before the ceiling fell in on him. Apart from a cornea scratched by grit, he was undamaged. Part of the boundary wall had fallen on the other security guard, giving him bruised ribs and a broken ankle. He had managed to drag himself into a vehicle and go for help, but he had ended up lodged in a traffic jam on the outskirts of Rafina. Gladwin's rescue party had arrived at the villa before the security guard had been able to contact the police.

There was nothing about the explosion at the *Gletscher* Klinik in the recent Greek newspapers. A major event in a small corner of Baden-Württemberg had not travelled well. Klara had to order back issues of West German papers to follow that story.

Wednesday's paper, printed not long after the explosion, just mentioned that one man had been killed in an explosion. Thursday's stories included interviews with firemen and bomb-disposal experts, and speculation about who had blown up the cryostore. Friday's papers had arrived by air while Helm had been back in the nineteenth century. The populars, especially *Bild Zeitung* had made a meal of the alleged Nazi connection.

Phileros Makronotis breezed into their sitting room as Helm was finishing off the story of arson and demolition in West Germany that the earthquake had interrupted. Makronotis threw his large frame into a chair with reckless disregard for its survival and beamed at Helm.

"Excellent work, Mr. Scott. We identified four of your six sketches from police files. Some are known associates of the men accounted for after they kidnapped my granddaughter. Mr. Erlich's staff are now looking for them. As a second line of attack, he has suggested a trap.

"The insured value of the items in their van, which you took from

them in such a dramatic fashion, is one point eight million dollars. An irresistible temptation to a man less scrupulous than yourself, and the basis of the trap. When the details have been finalized, we shall release the news that you have disappeared with the van. Then the gang will learn where to find the van. Your final job for me, Mr. Scott, will be as bait in the trap."

"Great," said Helm in a neutral tone, which offered neither enthusiasm nor sarcasm. It was as ambiguous as the word 'final' – which could mean either the last job before he was allowed to go home to spend his money, or the last job that he would ever do.

17. AMBUSH FOR ONE

KLARA WAS WHISKED OFF to tackle a legal job. Helm received the rest of the day off and a payment of 15,000 drachmas for his efforts with the hypnotist. Being given a little cash for every slight service was demeaning, he found. He felt rich enough to charge for just major jobs now. The incidentals could be written off as favours. Makronotis was tipping him as automatically as he would tip a waiter and asking for his opinion less frequently. He was being treated like a general-purpose blunt instrument – rather than a precision instrument – and it was the lack of consultation that rankled most.

The receptionist waved to him as he was leaving the hotel for the second time. Someone had telephoned a message for him. It ran: 'Lunch at the Café Kassimasti at one. Eva.' Helm recalled that he had not yet disposed of her letters but he was heading for the Monastiraki district anyway.

He took a taxi to Molivi Street and window-shopped on the way to see Thiroros, dealer in Nazibilia. He saw a dark green cap farther down the street, which struck him as strange. The wearer looked about Roger Gladwin's height and build, but Helm had been told that Gladwin had gone back to his base in Corinth, within easy reach of his two mistresses. According to Klara, he was seeing a bar-owner in Loutraki as well as the journalist in Periyali.

Helm stepped into a doorway when the green cap slowed down. He was unable to see the face when the wearer turned a full circle to look up and down the street. The green cap was gone when Helm stepped back into the street. He hurried to its last position – a jeweller's shop. The man in the green cap was standing at the counter with his back to the door.

Helm pretended to admire a display of watches in the doorway as he squinted sideways into the shop. The man in the green cap opened a briefcase and took out a characterless statue of a man on a horse. Helm had seen the foot-high jade figure before – in the van that he had

commandeered at the villa the previous night. It had been poking out of some cotton wool packing in one of the cartons in the back of the vehicle.

Helm moved down the street to a café. He spent a quarter of an hour with a cup of coffee and a sticky bun. Then he returned to the jeweller's. The briefcase was standing on the counter but there was no sign of its owner. Helm crossed the street to another jeweller opposite.

The owner spotted a victim, came to the door of his shop, established Helm's nationality and dragged him inside. Old Kleftos across the street would swindle him rotten, he learned. The rival's prices were much more reasonable. After five minutes' looking, Helm selected a \$245 silver dolphin brooch for Klara.

Roger Gladwin's dark green cap went past the front display window at that moment. Helm glanced at his watch. If he was going to get to the Café Kassimasti in time for his luncheon appointment, he wouldn't be able to see the Nazibilia dealer. The jeweller sold him a silver dragonfly brooch, gave him his change from a \$1,000 dollar bill in dollars, and phoned for a taxi. He was obviously used to dealing with dollar-rich jet-setters.

As he headed for a more exclusive part of the city, Helm wondered how much Gladwin had been paid for the stolen statue while marvelling at his audacity. It was a perfect crime, which could be blamed on the crooks in perfect safety. The insurance company would be the only loser – along with everyone who paid premiums to it. Given the choice, Helm felt sure that anyone with good taste would rather have the money than that statuette.

Eva von Arlberg looked very cool and collected in the air-conditioned café, which felt positively chilly after the tropical heat of Spangos Square. Her greeting was warm and her appetite healthy. She demolished a plate of hors d'oeuvres, pulled a charming face when Helm suggested octopus for the next course and accepted his recommendation of a swordfish steak.

"I heard some interesting news just before I left," she remarked after the waiter had taken their order. "Your friend Morgenstern had an accident this morning. He tried to drive under a trailer with a container on it. The top of his car was sliced right off."

"At least he died happy," said Helm. "Any help from you and your father?"

Eva smiled innocently. "Daddy was most upset. He wanted to sue the old fool for libel after the stories he spread about Nazis in our cryo-store."

"You mean it was Morgenstern's relatives who did away with him? They finally got fed up of paying for lawyers?"

"A libel action would have cost them at least one million dollars, if not more. Now, he cannot waste any more of their inheritance on silly adventures. The strange thing is they could not find his head in the car."

Helm smiled across the table. Eva was playing her games again. He refused to let her put him off his lunch. At the same time, he did wonder if someone had frozen Sigismund Morgenstern's head so that he could say hello to Adolf Hitler if someone managed to bring the great dictator back to life to rule in the next millennium. The waiter danced around them, delivering food and topping up wine glasses, putting a break point in the conversation.

"How's your swordfish?" Helm said after Eva had toured her plate.

"Well cooked and well presented – as I would expect in a café with three stars," she replied. "Did you sell my letters?"

"Not yet. Thiroros only offered three thousand five hundred on Wednesday so I told him I had another potential customer. I was planning to go back this afternoon to see if he was feeling more reasonable."

"You mean *you* still have them?"

"In a safe place, yes."

"Good. He offered them to someone else for eleven thousand five hundred yesterday. I thought he had them already."

"He told me he might have to hang on to them for months before he found a buyer. But he would, wouldn't he? Has Daddy noticed you pinched my ten grand out of his safe?"

"I took fifteen," smiled Eva. "I needed some money very quickly to buy a painting. Then I let him force me to admit you are blackmailing me. Naturally, I refused to say over what. Which saved having to think of something."

"Actually, I do have something to blackmail you with," Helm realized.

"Oh, what?"

"I'll show you when we collect the letters. You're not carrying a gun, by any chance?"

"No, why?" smiled Eva.

"It's a high class bank and I think they have a metal detector round the door, like the ones in airports."

"Talking of metals, I brought a present for you."

The envelope contained thousand-dollar bills. The black presentation case looked the right size to contain a cigarette lighter. Non-smoker Helm found a flat, gold box inside. He pressed the spring catch automatically.

"The original use is for a book of matches," said Eva. "Most people keep contraceptives in them now."

"So I see. Is this in case the lady doesn't have a packet in her SS

uniform?" Helm closed the gold box quickly as their waiter approached. "My present for you is purely ornamental."

"How lovely." Eva seemed genuinely pleased with her silver dragonfly. She kept the waiter waiting while Helm pinned it to her blouse, then she ordered a sticky-sweet, fruit salad dish for desert.

Eva paid the bill with international plastic. The silvery credit card made no impression on Helm but it sent the waiter away with an even more respectful expression. They stepped straight into a taxi on leaving the café. Helm became invisible in the bank where he had his deposit box. The men admired Eva while the women worked out how much her elegant silk suit had cost. Helm returned her letters in the examination room of the deposit vault, then he showed Eva the plan of the cryostore complete with her written comments.

"It was no joke about blackmail?" she said thoughtfully, no longer smiling.

"I posted it here from Zürich," said Helm. "I was going to use it to frighten Daddy if he got me back to the family seat to shake me down for more of my earnings."

"It would cost him all the insurance money if you would prove I helped to destroy the cryostore."

"They might send you both to gaol for attempted fraud," grinned Helm. "Now you know why I asked you if you had a gun."

"And you would use this?"

"I might, if I had to," Helm said grimly.

"So how much do you want for it? Shall I start the bidding at one hundred thousand dollars?"

"I was thinking more of half a million."

"Daddy will faint when I tell him that."

"He's more likely to disown you and let you take the full blame. Think you'll enjoy prison food?"

"What makes you think I would stay to be arrested?" Eva said defiantly.

"Right," said Helm with a nod of approval. He would have enjoyed teasing Graf Maximillian von Arlberg with the loss of his insurance payout but he knew that he couldn't take a swipe at the count without hitting his daughter too. He was also on the threshold of his final dangerous mission – playing decoy duck for Phileros Makronotis again. The plan of the cryostore was too dangerous to leave lying around and liable to fall into the wrong hands.

There was a large ashtray of volcanic glass on the table. Helm tore the incriminating plan into strips. "I think we can have a small bonfire without setting the fire alarm off. Have you got a light? I don't seem to have any matches in my little box."

Eva took a gold lighter out of her handbag and lit one of the strips before he could change his mind. "You play this game like an expert, Johnny. You had me really worried. This will cost you a lot of money."

Helm shrugged. "You don't miss what you never had. And I don't think they'd let you take your maid and a Ferrari to gaol. And what do I care if your dad's screwing some Gnomes of Zürich? What did they ever do for me? Now we're quits for you saving me from being robbed and shot by bloody Avvi at the clinic on Tuesday night."

Eva burned the last strip of paper, then wrapped a tissue round her index finger to crush the curled ashes. Her smile had returned to full strength. Helm sensed that there was a thoughtful edge to it. "You're not going to tell Daddy we burned the evidence," he divined.

"Daddy is such an old miser," Eva said with her smile at a relentless level. "And he can afford to be blackmailed a little bit."

An attendant took the empty deposit box back to its shelf. Helm saw Eva to a taxi and kissed her goodbye. She was fun in small doses but her rules for the game of life involved betrayal whenever it became convenient for her. They had begun the week as rivals, with Eva pointing a gun at him. They had become partners in arson and fraud on an international scale. It was best to part as friends before they became enemies. Betrayal was inevitable sooner or later if they stayed in touch.

Helm took his Australian passport to another bank, one that Eva didn't know about, where he rented another deposit box for a month as Bruce Dundee. The English-speaking clerk asked him if he was related to *Crocodile* Dundee. Helm gave him a patient smile, playing the part of a man confronted yet again with an old and unwelcome joke.

When his collection of \$1,000 bills from the late Sigismund Morgenstern was safely locked away, Helm bought a thick, manilla business envelope for the passport, addressed it to Bruce Dundee, sealed it with an excess of tape and lodged it in the poste restante section at the main post office. If John Scott was about to become a target for a gang of Greek kidnappers and big league thieves, he felt safer with an escape fund that was a secret from both Eva von Arlberg and the Makronotis organization.

Helm was intercepted as soon as he stepped out of the lift on the Hotel Renga's third floor. The man who rushed him along the corridor to room 310 looked like Sergeant Bilko without the glasses and talked like Ronald Reagan. The stranger introduced himself on the move as Craven Kaiser, the American security advisor and Tsai's boss. Helm had trouble taking in what he said at first. He kept expecting Bilko's hectoring, action-packed delivery, not a breathy, Californian draw. Kaiser seemed used to the problem and accustomed to repeating himself.

"Enjoy your lunch?" Kaiser said when they were sitting on opposite sides of the conference table in room 310.

"Yes, thanks." Helm tried to hide any guilt behind a note of defiance.

Kaiser tossed a Polaroid photograph onto the table. It showed Eva saying hello to Helm at the Café Kassimasti with a kiss. She had her arms round his neck and her whole body said that she was giving him much more than a polite peck. "What's your relationship with Eva von Arlberg?" said Kaiser.

"Over, I think." Helm put the photograph in his pocket.

"So no hard feelings for dragging you into her father's insurance swindle?"

"Nope." Helm assumed Kaiser had questioned Klara.

"Did you sleep with her?"

"I don't think that's any of your damn business."

"I'll take that as an affirmative. Dangerous adventures turn her on. You have no further plans with her?"

"She wanted me to sell some letters but the bloke didn't offer enough. I think she's got another buyer now, because she wanted the letters back. So I returned them and off she went. End of relationship."

"Okay, I'll buy that," said Kaiser. "How do you feel about the upcoming operation?"

"I haven't been told all the details, so I haven't agreed to do it. And no one's even mentioned a fee."

Kaiser flicked through the papers on his clipboard. "Ten per cent of the insured value of the goods you saved from the villa is the price."

"You mean a hundred and eighty thousand dollars?" gaped Helm.

Kaiser glanced back at his clipboard. "Correct."

"Sounds a bloody dangerous job if it's worth that much."

"The price is related to the value of goods recovered, not the risk factor of the job."

"Oh!" Helm wasn't reassured. "What's anyone planning to do with the crooks when you catch them?"

"The boss favours a bomb to give them a taste of their own medicine."

"I'd vote for that." Helm remembered the women in the café, whose legs had been blown off. "Is Tsai in on this?"

"She's in Paris. Visiting her parents."

"Doing what?" frowned Helm.

"Someone told you Mr. Makronotis is her father?" Kaiser said with a slow smile. "Her old man's a U.S. Treasury agent on permanent assignment to Interpol in Paris. Her mother's from a Vietnamese family that settled in France."

"So it's not true Tsai's mother is dead? Or the boss is the father of one

of Eva von Arlberg's sisters?"

"No and no comment."

"I'll take the latter as an affirmative. So French is Tsai's first language? Next to Vietnamese?"

"It sure as hell ain't Greek or English."

"I don't know, she manages to make herself understood." Applying a cynical insight to a security officer's conduct, Helm realized that Gladwin had made him wary of talking freely to Tsai by implying that she was a direct channel to Makronotis. Through his caution, Helm had also denied himself a means of cross-checking things that Gladwin had told him.

"So how come you're in charge of this operation," Helm added. "Did old Erlich get the push, or something?"

"There may be a leak. Deliberate or accidental. Which is why my team is running a closed operation. This information is confidential, okay?"

"Right," nodded Helm. "I suppose Erlich's the main suspect? He's the man on the spot in Athens, and there's his social connections in Germany and Austria, which could include the von Arlbergs. That was a major cock-up, the one over the jewellery delivery."

"I guess the first step is to get you out of sight." Kaiser ignored Helm's speculation. "You remember the café where Tsai picked you up after you bugged out of the Hotel Batiris? When the guy tried to knife you last week?"

"I remember going to a café," shuddered Helm. "I've got no idea where it is, though."

"I'll give you some directions. Basically, what you do is change into something casual and wait at the café."

"To be picked up by Gladwin, as usual?"

"He's back in Corinth as of this morning, so you can forget any side trips to clubs for entertainment on the way."

"He only seems to know female impersonators. Some entertainment."

"A contact known to you will take you to your hideout. You'll wait there until the trap closes."

"Getting down to the real basics, how dangerous is it? How much of a chance do I have of collecting my fee? Or spending it, rather, as I assume it comes in advance so my next of kin will get the benefit of it if I don't?"

"The danger factor is better than any of the other jobs you've done."

"Of course, you wouldn't tell me anything else," said Helm cynically.

"The timetable will be: we notice you haven't come back to the hotel tomorrow morning. The word goes out you took the loot before lunchtime. You can expect your visitors as soon as it gets dark."

"How close will your people be?"

"The less you know about the operation, the better."

"I'll take that as a 'not very', shall I?"

"Your job is to sit at your hideout and wait for your mythical buyer to contact you, okay?"

"Okay." Helm shrugged. There was no other answer. "One last question, is it true your father was in the FBI?"

"Yes," said Kaiser.

"What about the Ku Klux Klan?"

"Are you kidding me?" demanded Kaiser.

"No, but I think some bugger's not been kidding me all the time." By seasoning his disinformation with truth, Gladwin had left Helm not knowing what to believe, as intended.

Changed into jeans and a pale blue sweatshirt, and carrying an anorak with his wallet zipped into a pocket, Helm strolled out of the Hotel Renga and into the relatively cool, shaded side of the Elousis Square. The café lay six minutes' walk away. Helm settled down with a bottle of beer, a sticky bun and one of his books. He had touched Craven Kaiser for 25,000 drachmas for expenses. He was quite well off but the bulk of his portable wealth, cash and traveller's cheques, was in dollars and he enjoyed pushing his luck for more Greek money.

A stranger sat down at his table just after four o'clock, when he had been in the café for half an hour. The black wig and wraparound sunglasses were an effective disguise but Klara Amercott's New Yorker accent and intimate manner gave her away at once. And there were other clues.

"Hi, are you ready to go?" she murmured, leaning close to him.

Helm glanced up from his book. "Sorry, love, I'm waiting for someone." He glanced at his watch. "Unless you can make it a real quickie."

"It's me, you clown, not a hooker!" Klara protested, lifting her sunglasses for a moment.

"Does that mean I don't get my quickie?" grinned Helm.

"How did you recognize me?" Klara's tight jeans and baggy shirt were a complete contrast to her normal, tidy self.

"You mean my present isn't a recognition signal?"

Klara glanced down at her silver dolphin brooch. "It was a lovely surprise when I found it in my room. Thanks, John."

"And there's your red nail varnish. And your perfume. *Naughty Nights* is a bit too exclusive for café hookers."

"It's called *Nautical Nights*. It's supposed to make you think of ocean cruises."

"I know, you told me," said Helm. "Are we off?"

Helm glanced over his seat into the back of the van as Klara moved out into the afternoon traffic. The untidy jumble of packing materials mixed with paintings, silverware and valuable odds and sods had been replaced by neatly stacked cardboard boxes. Helm wondered if there was anything in them.

The cartons were sealed with grey parcel tape but the one that he tried to lift felt heavy enough to be full of characterless jade statuettes. One carton was open. It contained food, bottled water, soap, towels, a battery-powered shaver and some spare clothing for the next day.

Klara headed out toward the villa at first. Helm noticed that the rubble of the collapsed apartment building had been shoved off the road, but it still blocked the pavement. Klara turned left to head north – first on a fairly decent road, and then on a winding, dusty track. They had reached their destination before Helm realized where they were going.

Klara drove through the open wooden door and parked in Demosthenes Taxacaris' cave workshop. When he opened the back doors, Helm noticed that the bullet holes in the van had been filled and painted over. He carried the carton of supplies over to the stone hut. There was no sign of the old sculptor, which was just as well. Helm assumed that another pawn in the game of chess played with human beings had been moved to another part of the board.

"How many stars has this jernt got?" Klara exaggerated her New Yorker accent comically. "Minus four or five?"

"If you get here soaked to the skin when it's pissing down outside, and there's a roaring fire inside, it's got all the stars you need." Helm realized that the hut was looking a lot cleaner and tidier than he remembered. He assumed that a Makronotis organization cleaning crew had been through it as part of the usual facilitation procedures.

"You've been here before?"

"Remember when Sophia was kidnapped? Whenever that was?"

"It was only last week, John."

"It feels more like last year now. Anyway, I ended up here after I got away from the kidnappers. And they know they lost me around here. If someone told them I found this place back then, well, it's a great place to hide now."

"Craven Kaiser could put an army round here and you'd never see them," agreed Klara.

"Are you with me for the duration?"

"Would you like me to stay?"

"Of course. But it that's the plan, we're going straight back to Athens to tell Kaiser to think again. It could get pretty hairy here tomorrow."

"So you don't reckon I should take the same risks as a man?" said Klara aggressively.

"You're not going all sexist on me?" groaned Helm. "Or are you getting paid a hundred and eighty thousand bucks too?"

"Jesus!" Klara stared at him with big, round eyes.

"I'll take that as a negative."

"You sound like Kaiser, John. No, he told me to stay here till it starts to get dark, then use the BMX bike in the garage to go two and a half miles south of here to a rendezvous. I'm here for another three hours."

"Does that mean you've got time for a cup of coffee?"

"I guess so. Did you enjoy your lunch?"

"Does everyone in Athens know I had lunch with Eva von Arlberg? Bloody good job I wasn't trying to keep it secret."

"John, she's a dangerous person to have a relationship with."

"I suppose Kaiser showed you his famous photo? Well, I'm not having a relationship with her. In fact, we exchanged parting gifts. I don't expect to see her again."

"What did you give her?" Klara looked down at her dolphin brooch.

"A silver dragonfly. Which cost thirty bucks less than your present."

"What did she give you?"

"It's in my coat. I shouldn't look if you're easily embarrassed." Helm poured boiling water into a jug containing ground coffee.

Klara perched on the bottom bunk and went through the pockets of Helm's anorak. She found the gold box and accepted the challenge of opening it. "Was she trying to embarrass you, John?" she chuckled.

"I think she wanted to know what I'd do if I dropped German johnnies all over the table just as the waiter arrived. Life's just a big game to her. I bet she stuck a pin in them."

"No, they look all right."

"There's only one way to find out for sure," said Helm.

"And we've got another three hours together," said Klara thoughtfully.

Helm made an early start to his solitary Saturday morning. He was up at seven-thirty on another boringly hot day, which was hot already and getting hotter. He wished that Klara had stayed the night so that he would have someone to talk to as he made himself a bacon sandwich for lunch. Minus his luggage, he missed another iron capsule.

He and Klara had known each other for just a week, but time seemed to have expanded for a man living as if each day could be his last. They seemed compatible to an amazing degree, and he had kept few secrets from her. Sketching his life history had taken very little time. He had presented his medical history as a motive rather than a sentence of death.

Klara knew his real name and nationality, and that he had enjoyed a one-night stand with Eva von Arlberg after his brush with death at her

father's clinic. Helm had even told her about seeing Gladwin disposing of one of the valuables that they had salvaged from the villa.

Klara had told him about life in Buffalo and New York City. She still felt wounded by her ex-husband's desertion, and glad that he had ended up in gaol. At the same time, she was a little ashamed at gloating over another's misfortune – but not much.

Helm had met her two days after strolling in on Demosthenes Taxacaris out of the only rainstorm locally in a couple of months. He was reduced to listening to the BBC World Service again on Taxacaris' new radio. His new life was all rush and rest, living at an accelerated pace of danger and then sitting on airliners for hours on end, reading a book and brooding about what the hell he was doing to himself.

He was on his last job for Phileros Makronotis now. One more charge through the Valley Of Death, then he was off to spend a lot of money. Or he was heading for an early grave before he got his jet-setting done. Speculating about what he and Klara could do about their flourishing relationship, if everything worked out for him, was a harmless way of passing the time.

He finished his current book through the morning and took an early lunch. A sudden rush of movement at the door took him by surprise as he was thinking about washing up. The man who entered the hut was wearing camouflage gear and a dark green beret.

"You're supposed to be in Corinth," said Helm.

"I know," grinned Roger Gladwin.

"Why aren't I surprised you're here? Are you some sort of bodyguard?"

"You could say I'm here to take care of you."

"What's the timetable?"

"The opposition know where you are. They're planning to move in about half-nine, when the Moon goes down and it's properly dark. Kaiser's mob begin distant surveillance at fifteen hundred this afternoon, and move to their ambush positions at eighteen hundred."

"Why don't the bad guys move in right away?"

"Because the only fence big enough to handle your haul is in Turkey until tomorrow, so there's no rush.

"So I should be out of here by ten this evening?" said Helm.

"Wrong." Gladwin took a revolver out of his belt holster and pointed it across the hut. "You'll be out of here in a quarter of an hour."

18. HANGING AROUND

HELM WAS SITTING BY THE table with his feet up on a stool. His instinct was to freeze his body in case the slightest movement startled Gladwin into shooting him. At a higher level, he knew that nothing that he could do would startle a man with Gladwin's poise and experience.

"What calibre's your gun?" he asked in a tone that almost succeeded in conveying boredom.

"Three fifty-seven Magnum." Gladwin frowned. "Why?"

"It's just that I'd hate to surrender to a popgun. So you're the leak? I don't give much for your chances."

"I don't give much for yours when Kaiser finds out you've been working for me under a false identity."

"Not even if it was your idea?"

"Is he going to believe it, though?"

"So what's your first move."

"Yours is to put these on." Gladwin dropped two pairs of handcuffs onto the table. "Cuff your right wrist to your left ankle and vice versa."

Helm obeyed. He even summoned the cheek to have a drink of mineral water before he immobilized himself. Then Gladwin brought a suitcase into the hut and began to unpack gadgets. He seemed to have packed a whole lot of stuff into a small volume.

"This is an electronic presence," he explained. "I'm going to draw the curtains and shut the door so no one can look inside. This will switch a light on when it gets dark, create moving shadows on the curtains, change channels on a radio and so on. Everyone will think you're sitting tight, waiting for your buyer to arrive tomorrow. So the gang will rush the hut and Kaiser's mob will flood the area with knock-out gas."

"They didn't tell me about that," said Helm. "Or bother giving me a gas mask."

"Since when did anyone tell you anything much?" scoffed Gladwin.

"Or anything other than a load of lies? In that situation, you learn to check things out for yourself."

"Meaning you saw me doing a deal on Molivi Street yesterday morning?"

"Were you worried I might try and blackmail you?"

"Me?" grinned Gladwin. "When we're working together? What do you think's in the van?"

"There's some paintings in one of the boxes. I had a look. They don't look anything special. I suppose the rest of the decoys are similar junk?"

"The decoys are in the Hotel Renga's security vault. I reckon Kaiser won't find them gone until someone notices you've gone missing for real."

"I suppose it was you who told Max von Arlberg who was really carrying his family heirlooms?"

"You don't like to see a bloke getting messed about by a woman."

"Did he actually pay you anything?"

"Nothing for nothing, Robert, lad," grinned Gladwin.

"Bloody hell!" said Helm, impressed. "Did you have to use dynamite to get his wallet open?"

"Just my natural charm."

Gladwin took a quarter of an hour to create his electronic presence. There was a small electric winch to lift a curtain open, as if Helm was checking for people sneaking up on him in the night, and then let it fall back into place. Gladwin fastened fishing weights to the stiff cloth to make sure that the curtain would fall closed. A cardboard cut-out shape on an arm would move in front of a light to throw shadows onto the closed curtains. The control box contained a built-in radio with automatic station change.

Helm was allowed to unlock his handcuffs, make a space among the boxes in the back of the van, then re-attach his wrists again to the opposite ankle. Gladwin drove a short distance from the workshop, then he returned to brush away his tracks with a leafy branch.

Helm could see a solid cloud of dust through the van's rear window when Gladwin set off the nearest road. Its source was explained when Gladwin stopped on the narrow, paved road to remove and discard the branches that he had tied to the bumper to remove his tyre tracks.

A quarter of an hour after setting off, Gladwin drove through a fairly large town and into a spacious, single-storey building with a steel-shutter door. Helm slid out of the van. He hobbled, still handcuffed, to a metal-framed chair. Gladwin had unscrewed the padded arm rests from the framework.

An eighteen-inch length of one-inch diameter steel tube lay on the green canvas seat of the chair. A doubled length of chain was threaded through the tube. Gladwin released Helm's left wrist and trapped it in the loop of chain protruding from the steel tube. He pulled the chain

taught, then he used a padlock to trap the free ends of the chain around Helm's right wrist. Helm was stuck with his wrists held tight up against the ends of the pipe.

Gladwin passed two more padlocks through bolt holes in the frame of the chair and fastened them through links of the chain. Helm found that he could move his wrists back and forward about an inch, but that was the full extent of his mobility. He hoped that he wouldn't develop an itch somewhere remote as Gladwin handcuffed his ankles to the chair. The strip of wide, surgical tape applied as a gag made him glad that he had taken the trouble to shave that morning.

Gladwin drove away in the van after a parting wave and a mocking grin. Helm's eyes had become accustomed to the gloom in the oblong building, which was built of brick with a roof of corrugated iron. It was around thirty yards long by twenty yards wide. The windows had been painted over with black paint. His chair was chained to a support for a pipe, which ran along one of the long walls. He was about twenty yards from the door.

Helm could see a heap of wooden pallets at the back of the building, which suggested that it was used for storage. There was a composty smell mixed with the van's exhaust. Some painful tugging convinced him that he wasn't going to be able to free his chair from the cast iron pipe and its bracket. Not being Harry Houdini, he was stuck. But he felt in no immediate danger.

He was sure that if he were too dangerous to keep alive, Gladwin would have shot him in the wild country on the way to wherever they were. Koropi was the first town of any size directly to the south of the hut. No, his problems would begin when Gladwin released him.

Phileros Makronotis was rich enough to order his men to shoot first and worry about recovering the loot later. In fact, if the odd items that Helm had seen were typical of the whole, then Makronotis might prefer to settle for the insurance money.

Gladwin returned after twenty minutes. He removed the tape-gag with surprising care and unlocked Helm's bonds. The van was parked right outside the door. Helm took the wheel. Gladwin got in the back, among the boxes. There were fewer boxes and Gladwin pushed the survivors aside as if they were empty. He had exchanged his camouflage jacket for a long, loose, dark blue zip-up jacket, which hid his belt holster.

After reminding Helm about his gun, Gladwin told him to take the road to the west. They met a road north to Athens in sight of the airport. Helm overtook one of the airport buses and wondered where the hell he was going with a vanload of empty boxes.

Their destination was a café on the edge of the Monastiraki district.

Helm and Gladwin drank *Heineken* at adjacent tables. No knowing the Greek for: *Help, I'm being held prisoner by a man with a gun under his jacket*, Helm felt obliged to sit at his table and wait for further orders.

A hot policeman with his shirt sleeves rolled up, walked round the van then gave it a parking ticket – either because he disliked that shade of green or because the van was standing too close to a corner. When the policeman was out of sight, Gladwin tapped Helm's ankle with his toe.

"Go to the van, crumple the ticket and ditch it."

Helm obeyed. Then he drove them back to Koropi. Gladwin let him use the ripe urinal at the back of the storage hanger before chaining him to the chair again. Gladwin moved the van into the building and rolled down the shutter door. Helm stained his ears but he heard no other vehicle start nearby within the next few minutes.

Gladwin had translated a radio news item on the way back - a description of an Irishman called John Scott. The police were looking for him as part of Kaiser's plan to make the notion that Scott had escaped with their loot more plausible to the kidnappers and villa-raiders. The police were not yet looking for the van, but a record of its parking offence would turn up in due course.

Craven Kaiser would place the worst possible interpretation on a sighting of the van at the shady end of Athens when it should have been miles away. He was assume that Helm had been negotiating a price for all or part of the loot with a second-rank fence instead of acting as bait. Helm could expect to receive from his fence up to twice what Makronotis was paying him to risk his neck, which would make the betrayal look worth while.

Helm was feeling hot, thirsty and hungry when Gladwin turned up again, half an hour later. It was half past six but not dinnertime. Gladwin wheeled a stand with a television and a videorecorder in front of Helm and plugged the system in at a wall socket. Then he removed the gag.

"The clock's running," said Gladwin. "Kaiser's mob settled into their ambush positions half an hour ago. The opposition will be having their dinner now. And telling each other how many pieces they're going to chop you into when they catch up with you."

"Great!" Helm croaked through his dry throat.

"I'd give you a drink but I don't want to encourage you to do any yelling. Thought you might like to watch some telly to pass the time." Gladwin started a tape playing and moved the television's volume control up its track.

The music video featured an American heavy-metal rock concert. Given rather more comfortable surroundings and a lower volume, Helm

might have enjoyed the entertainment. Gladwin attracted his attention by reaching round to the back of his loose jacket to take a self-loading pistol out of his belt.

He cocked the hammer with an ostentatious flick of his thumb and aimed the gun at the centre of Helm's forehead. Helm was sure he wouldn't pull the trigger right up to the moment when the hammer smashed down on the end of the firing pin, sending it on what turned out to be a fruitless journey into the chamber. Gladwin pushed the pistol into Helm's right hand.

"There's a full clip, but you need to get both hands on the slide to load it. Don't drop it. I'll be nearby, keeping an eye on you. You watch your telly."

Helm's chair faced the door. Anyone coming in would see him sitting there, apparently armed and dangerous. The back of his neck crawled when Gladwin moved behind him. The television drowned any subtle sound clues as to what the security advisor was up to.

First on the tape was a band called *L.A. Loud*, which did its best to live up to the name. A flash of light caught Helm's attention during the third or fourth number of the set. The steel-shutter door lifted just enough to let someone roll under it. When the door closed again, Helm lost the dark shape in the thick gloom. A movement at the van drew his eyes. Gladwin walked into view past his right shoulder. He switched off the video system on his way to the van. He returned dragging someone by the shoulders.

"Your little Chinese mate's bloody persistent," he remarked to Helm. "I had a lot of dodging about to do and there was a severe risk of picking up a tail. That Kaiser's a bloody suspicious sod. So I thought I'd better set up a trap in case he set his bloodhound on me."

"What have you done to her?" Helm demanded.

"Just a tranquillizer dart to knock her out for a few minutes."

"She's not Chinese, you know. She's American-French-Vietnamese."

"Yes, I know."

Gladwin threw a length of chain over a pipe near the top of the wall and used two more padlocks to create loops round Tsai Yuan-lin's wrists. Another of his apparently inexhaustible supply of padlocks closed off a loop of chain to leave her sagging in a standing position.

"Right, son, I'll just have a quick look round outside," said Gladwin. "Then we'll see about a little accident with a gun covered with your fingerprints. After the dope in the dart's worn off, of course. We wouldn't want it showing up at the post mortem, would we?"

Gladwin headed for the door. Helm's first impulse was to drop the pistol, but that wouldn't wipe his fingerprints off. He was sure that Tsai would know what to do to save the day, but she was out of action. It

was time for Robert Helm to come up with a solution for once. He needed to get some lateral thinking done – and quickly.

He knew that the pistol was loaded by pulling back the sliding steel jacket around the barrel. The slide had to be retracted until the spring in the magazine could push the top cartridge into the path of the bit that pushes cartridges into the chamber. Lateral thinking, he also knew, is all about turning a problem on its head to make it solvable. The opposite of pull is push.

Helm leaned forward and turned the muzzle of the pistol toward himself so that he could examine it at close range in the dim light. The weapon was a Colt *Commander*, according to the lettering on the slide, which had a rearing horse stamped into it.

There was a knurled ring at the back of the hammer, rather than the curving spur of a cowboy six-shooter, to allow it to be cocked with the thumb. The pistol was a hell of a weight – at least a couple of pounds. Helm gripped it tightly to make sure that he didn't drop it.

He would have to push the top part of the slide back. The clearance around the barrel was about an eighth of an inch. The blade of the foresight would give him a little more mechanical advantage. There was enough slack in the chain to let him lift his right wrist about an inch from the tubular arm of the chair, and he could turn his hand freely.

Helm turned his hand palm uppermost and rotated the pistol about his index finger, which he kept thrust through the trigger guard as a safety measure. When he was holding the barrel end instead of the butt, he stopped to consider his next move. With limited wrist mobility, he had to turn the pistol until he could wedge the top of the slide against the tubular arm of the chair.

The manoeuvre seemed impossible – until he realized that he had to turn his hand over. With the pistol upside down, butt pointing to the roof, index finger through the trigger guard for security, he pushed against the round arm of the chair. The pistol skidded off the painted metal at once.

It was all a question of getting the angle between slide and chair exactly right, and of applying enough downward force to create enough friction to lock them together. After several false starts, he got everything exactly right.

The slide started to move back against what felt like an incredibly strong spring. It moved back and back. Then the pistol slipped. The slide crashed forward with a ring of steel on steel.

When he dared to look, Helm could see that the hammer had been forced back far enough to lock it in the cocked position. Hoping that the weapon was loaded, he took his finger out of the trigger guard in case he shot himself in the leg by accident.

He turned the pistol cautiously until he was gripping the butt again, index finger straight beside the trigger guard, copying what he had seen often enough on TV. He put his thumb on the knurled grip on the hammer, then he put his finger on the trigger and squeezed gently. The spring was strong but he found he could lower the hammer under control onto the firing pin.

His night of passion with Eva von Arlberg had included a demonstration of the workings of a self-loading pistol. He knew that the firing pin needs a good whack from the hammer before it will fly against the resistance of its spring to fire the cartridge in the chamber. He also knew that, in theory, the firing pin remains safely in its tunnel if the hammer is lowered slowly.

Tsai's chains rattled. She seemed to be waking up very slowly. Then the shutter door rumbled up to about waist height. Gladwin ducked under it. Helm cocked the hammer of his pistol and aimed it at the approaching figure.

"Playing games, are we?" Gladwin called cheerfully.

Helm let him approach to within ten yards of the chair, then he leaned to the right, putting his eye-line over the pistol, to check his aim. "I managed to load this one-handed. I reckon you'd better put your hands up."

Gladwin stopped and put his hands on his hips. "Ten out of ten for trying, old son," he laughed. "You're really getting into this business, aren't you?"

"Put your gun on the floor and then unlock Tsai."

"Yeah, right!" laughed Gladwin.

Helm shifted his aim to one side and squeezed the trigger. The pistol bucked in his hand. Helm only just managed to hang on to it as the chain dug painfully into his wrist. Gladwin stopped laughing. Reaching into his jacket, he dropped into a crouch. There was a shot. Helm heard the bullet strike a wall. He started firing. Gladwin's head snapped back. He thudded to the concrete floor just before his Magnum pistol made its crash landing.

"Good shooting, Johnny," called a voice from the door. "Is this the van with all the lovely paintings and statues?" The female voice had a German accent.

"Is that you, Eva?" called Helm.

"Hello, darling." Eva von Arlberg in a black velvet jacket and matching pants approached to look at the prisoners, swinging her pocket-pistol by the trigger guard. "How were you planning to get free with the keys over there?"

"I was thinking more about staying alive," said Helm. "But now you're here, darling . . ."

"What is your van worth? Two million bucks?"

"You'll never get away with it. And this isn't a water pistol I'm holding. A gorgeous lady like you would look dreadful with bullet holes in her."

"You would shoot me for a lousy two million bucks, Johnny? The man who gave away nine point five million to save this woman's thumb? I know you are bluffing me, darling."

"Before you stroll off with the van and leave us, have a look in the back." Helm nodded to Gladwin's still form. "He moved everything."

Eva von Arlberg opened the rear door of the van and explored one of the boxes. It was empty. So were the others. With a shrug of regret, she went over to Gladwin to search his pockets for keys. Helm lowered the hammer of his pistol.

"Did you know your friend is still alive?" Eva remarked as she tested keys in Helm's padlocks.

She took the padlock keys over to Tsai while Helm was unlocking the handcuffs on his ankles. When he was free, he trotted over to Gladwin. The older man was lying sprawled on his back with his eyes open. His stare was fixed and there was no pulse in the hollow between his neck and his collar bone. He was dead now.

"No hard feelings," Helm said softly. "It was a nice try for your two million bucks." He had no doubt that Gladwin would have been able to raise at least as much as the full insurance value.

"Dead, Johnny?" said Tsai. She was holding Helm's pistol, which he had left on his chair, and Gladwin's Magnum. She was in charge again.

"Probably the best thing for him," said Helm. "He wouldn't have wanted Makronotis to get hold of him when he came out of hospital. I suppose Kaiser put you on his trail?"

"He should be in Corinth. Kaiser think he work with you. But work for himself. You save us both."

Tsai put her arms round Helm's neck and kissed him soundly. It was a strange experience. He wasn't used to being kissed by a woman with a heavy pistol clenched in either hand. Tsai glanced at Eva when she released him. Helm realized that she had made such a meal of the embrace for the other woman's benefit.

"Go phone now." Tsai gave Helm a quick peck on the lips. She told Eva to get out of town in frosty, fluent French, then she trotted to the shutter door.

"Your little friend thinks I should get lost, darling," said Eva.

"How ungracious." Helm tried to look shocked. He knew enough business and bar-room French to know that *he* would never use that sort of language to a lady. Tsai was clearly less inhibited – in Eva's case, at any rate.

"I might as well go," Eva added. "If your other friend left nothing in the van."

"Sorry to disappoint you," said Helm. "What brought you here, anyway?"

"Daddy was keeping track of you. To see if he could ambush you to make you stop blackmailing him. Naturally, when I heard you had disappeared with two million dollars of objects d'art, I came to look for you to help you to sell them for a good price. I put a bug on the Chinese woman's car."

"Clever of you." Helm started for the van. "Where did you get your gun?"

"People keep surprising things in deposit boxes. Not just money and blackmail documents."

Eva had thrown one of the cartons out of the van. Helm removed the rest of the boxes, shaking them before discarding them. Eva explored the corners of the van to make sure that nothing had fallen out of a box. It was Helm who found a lump wrapped in a hand-towel in the dashboard. He examined the six-inch, jade statuette without enthusiasm.

"It's pretty ghastly, isn't it?" he remarked.

"Seventeenth century Chinese, from the Manchu period," said Eva with the air of a connoisseur. "It must be worth fifty thousand dollars, darling."

"So you won't be going home empty-handed?"

"Will you go with me to make sure you will get your half share?" smiled Eva.

"I have to stay here to straighten things out with Makronotis. Your dad's only a millionaire. I've got a billionaire looking to ambush me and I don't fancy the odds. I'll keep quiet about the statue on one condition."

"I hope it will be one that I can keep," smiled Eva.

"Tell your dad you outsmarted me and I can't blackmail him any more. Because you destroyed the evidence."

"You drive a hard bargain, Johnny." Eva put the statuette down and gave Helm a long kiss. "That was better than the Chinese woman." There was no hint of question in her confident statement.

"Actually, she's French. Or American," said Helm.

"Really?" Eva's smile told him that she wasn't really interested.

Helm escorted her to the shutter door. It faced away from the town. He could see a road going south, leading into a lot of hilly countryside. He was surprised that no one had bothered to investigate the shots. They had sounded deafening inside the storage hanger.

Eva locked her precious bundle in the dashboard of her powder blue Mercedes sports car and took a sun-cover off the leather driving seat.

She headed north with a wave and the snarl of a highly tuned engine.

Tsai turned up in a dusty green Ford *Fiesta* just as Helm was starting to think that he had been abandoned. She fetched two of Gladwin's padlocks, closed the shutter door and used the padlocks to secure it. She left the keys above eye-level on the bracket of a drainpipe.

"We go hide now," she told Helm with a bright smile. "Feel okay, John?"

"I reckon," nodded Helm. "I feel, well, uninvolved. Gladwin was pushing the buttons all the way down to the end. He put the gun in my hand. He gave me no choice about pulling the trigger. I feel like I was just along for the ride."

"Stick with that," said Tsai.

She made Helm put on a pair of mirror sunglasses and pull a floppy hat down over his face. She drove toward the setting sun, then turned north toward familiar territory. As they approached Valaki, Helm remembered that he had rented the studio flat for four weeks. He was entitled to hide there for the next four days. Tsai changed course when he suggested the flat as a hiding place. She seemed to like his plan better than her own.

Tsai told him to go indoors when they reached their hide-out, then she carried on up the road to do some shopping. There were signs of occupation in the first-floor flat – wrapping paper, empty bottles and recent newspapers.

Helm realized that Gladwin, or his satellites, had been using the place. He knew now why he had been told to pay a month's rent when he expected his first job for Phileros Makronotis to last just the one week. Gladwin had been free-lancing from an unsuspected base.

Tsai found him sitting in a beach chair on the flat part of his roof, listening to a neighbour's television, which was tuned to what sounded like an American cop show dubbed into Greek.

"Am I in the clear now?" Helm asked after polishing off half a bottle of mineral water. "Or are you going to tell me 'yes' now and shove a gun in my face later?"

"What can I say to that?" laughed Tsai. "You in clear, cross my heart, hope to die. When Kaiser phone, we go to hotel in Athens."

"So we're here for a while? Did you bring any grub?"

Tsai unpacked a bottle of wine, a round loaf and hot, grilled mullet in greaseproof paper.

"How are your wrists?" said Helm. "You seem to be making a career out of getting hung up. I know I didn't enjoy it when that old ratbag Ianos did it to me."

"Okay now," said Tsai. "You still okay about Gladwin? Kaiser fix boat accident. No body found."

"You heard what he was going to do?"

"Shoot me, leave gun with your fingerprint."

"I didn't want to shoot him. I think he might have shot me while I was making my mind up. If Eva hadn't taken a pot at him, and missed when he went into his firing crouch . . . I thought it was Gladwin shooting at me. That's why I started shooting at him."

"Believe me, Johnny, if you not shoot Gladwin, he shoot us both. It was us or two million bucks. Easy choice for Gladwin. You get rid of that woman okay?"

"Eva? The van was empty so there was no reason for her to stick around."

"You know where treasure buried?"

"You fancy digging it up and disappearing with me?"

"Good idea, but we get caught when we sell stuff."

"I suppose you're right. Gladwin went somewhere in the van for about twenty minutes. Most of the boxes had gone and the rest were empty when he came back. Allowing five minutes for unloading, and a bit more for hiding the boxes, he can't have gone far. If you do a bit of detective work, you should find the stuff easily enough. This fish is bloody good. It's one of the things I'll miss about Greece."

"You go home now, Robert?"

"What happened to Johnny? How long have you known who I really am?"

"Kaiser not trust Gladwin. Or you. Always in clubs with Gladwin."

"What do you mean, clubs? Plural?" protested Helm.

"Gladwin say you go to lots of clubs with him."

"There was only one! Between being collected from old Taxacaris' hut and getting set up for filleting by bloody Erlich at the Hotel Batiris."

"Gladwin say lots, so Kaiser run check on you. Johnny Scott just passport and driving licence. Find out this morning your name Robert Helm."

"And that made him even more suspicious of me? Just the way Gladwin planned it. Mix in a little truth to spice up a lot of lies and I end up on his side. No, he can't have planned all this from the start. He must have been creating options in case they came in useful."

"Kaiser more suspicious when you and van gone at ambush. And treasure gone from hotel."

"I thought they were just going to surround the hut and not move in till the bad guys arrived?"

Tsai shrugged. "Tell you one plan, do another."

"Yes, there's a lot of that about." Helm refilled their glasses with wine as a fusillade erupted from the neighbour's television room. "What the hell are that lot watching?"

"Yank cop show. Kaiser call it *Miami Tripe*."

"I never thought I'd be living something like that. But I suppose you're used to it?"

"I go places, check on people, come home," said Tsai. "All routine. Only excitement on security exercise. We not have kidnap and earthquake every week, Johnny."

"I suppose not. If you did, Makronotis would have taken his billion somewhere quieter years ago. Cheers!"

The long-awaited telephone call came as half a Moon was dropping onto a lighthouse at the southern tip of Salamis. It was a warm, starry night, with lights moving in the dark bowl of the bay on business and for the benefit of tourists. Tsai went down to the studio in response to the insistent rings. She returned carrying a heavy shopping bag.

"Bad guys attack early," she announced. "All in bag now. We go to Athens."

"Suits me," said Helm. "Want me to carry your bag?"

"Ha, ha!" mocked Tsai.

"What?"

Tsai opened her shopping bag. "Give you guns, Johnny?"

"How could I know what you've got in here?" said Helm indignantly.

"I haven't got bloody X-ray eyes. And I thought we were on the same side. What have I got to gain from pointing a gun at you?"

"Maybe you know where treasure is."

"What's the French for 'suspicious sod'? All right, carry your own bloody bag."

Helm was fuming inside as he carried the chairs from the roof to the studio, switched things off and locked up. Tsai attitude was professionally correct – keeping him at arm's length – but he felt that he had earned the right to be trusted. Tsai gave him the keys to her car. When he was sitting behind the wheel, Helm switched on the interior light and turned to face her.

"Before we go anywhere, I want to get something straight. Am I supposed to be your prisoner?"

"No," said Tsai.

"Am I on your side? If so, why can't I have a gun?"

"Sorry, Johnny, orders."

"How far would you go to follow these orders? Would you shoot me down if Makronotis gave you a direct order?"

"No way."

"Would you just stand by and let Kaiser shoot me instead?"

"No way. You good guy. Save my life."

"All right, prove you think I'm a good guy."

"How?" frowned Tsai.

"Give me that automatic. And the magazine you took out."

"Orders, Johnny. Kaiser say no gun for you."

"Screw Kaiser. And screw your orders, too. This is strictly between you and me. Prove you trust me or you'll have to drive one-handed because you'll need a gun in the other hand to keep me in the car."

"Or what? If I not give you gun?"

"Or I leg it for the airport at the first opportunity and get the hell out of here. And no more co-operation, that's for sure."

"You not got passport."

"Suppose you let me worry about that? Well? What about it?"

Tsai looked at him for a long time, then she shrugged. She took the pistol and the magazine out of her shopping bag and handed them to Helm. He inserted the magazine and worked the slide to load a round into the chamber.

"So, you're at my mercy now. I could shoot you and drive off to dig up the treasure."

"You not shoot me," said Tsai.

"You're absolutely sure of that?"

"Yes." Tsai nodded confidently. "Not even point gun at me."

"I wish I could be as sure as you." Helm lowered the hammer and returned the pistol. He had kept it pointing up at the roof to make absolutely sure that an accident would blow a hole in the car rather than Tsai.

"I good guy too." Tsai unloaded the pistol. "We go now?"

"We go now," said Helm. "And thanks, Tsai. I really need someone I can trust. And someone who trusts me. That was a bit of a risk you took."

"Trust own judgement," said Tsai, the competent professional.

Helm started the engine. He headed for Athens, slicing into the thick gloom of an unlit road with his headlights on full beam. He was well aware that his demonstration of good faith from Tsai counted for very little. She knew that he wasn't the sort of person to shoot her just because she had annoyed him. But if Helm had been trapped with nothing to lose, arming him would be another matter entirely.

He had been assailed from all sides in the last month or so – by bombs, by criminals, by an earthquake and even by his own body. He had seen enough dirty dealing and betrayal to keep a TV series going for six months. And he had been forced to make life and death decisions for real.

He was more John Scott than Robert Helm now. And he was a lot more dangerous than he had been a month before. He still had a future that might run out the next time he saw his doctor, and he had been

through enough trouble to know how to create problems for the trouble-makers.

Helm made good time to the city, then he struggled through Saturday night traffic on the race tracks at the heart of Athens. Tsai flashed a pass to deflect the attendant at the Hotel Renga's car park. She escorted Helm to room 310, then left to deposit the shooting irons in the armoury.

Phileros Makronotis and an aide were sitting at an impressive bank of radio equipment, busy killing a celebratory bottle of champagne. The aide opened another bottle to fill a glass for Helm. Helm gave an account of his day from Gladwin's arrival at the hut onwards. He mentioned Eva von Arlberg's timely arrival but kept quiet about her departure with a trophy worth \$50,000.

"And so you consider your assignment complete, Mr Helm?" Makronotis said when Helm ran out of things to tell him.

Helm shrugged, knowing that the decision lay out of his hands. "You've got all the kidnappers, I hear. And the loot. You had no idea what Gladwin was planning? Or your security staff?"

"The English have a talent for treachery. They make no song and dance about it, they just get on with it, throwing suspicion elsewhere." Makronotis opened a folder on the conference table to show Helm an Irish passport. "I regret I shall have to keep your travel documents until my property is recovered. You will find your luggage in your usual room."

"You haven't got the loot yet? Well, I suppose your people have been a bit busy. As I told Tsai, Gladwin wasn't away for long so it can't be far from where he took me. I'll go and wallow in a bath if you don't need me."

Helm left the conference room wondering where Klara was. If he had to stay on in Athens, he was entitled to have the companionship of his personal interpreter. Tsai emerged from another room as he was walking along the corridor. He gave a wolf whistle to attract her attention.

"What happened to Klara? Is she here?" he called.

"Americott bad guy," Tsai said apologetically. "She work for Gladwin. Sorry, Johnny. She locked up somewhere."

Helm stopped and stared at her. Betrayal seemed common currency in his new life but he would have staked everything on being able to count on Klara. He had been feeling quite cheerful. Now, depression swamped him. He felt trapped and unable to trust Phileros Makronotis to let him go without finding him another suicide mission.

19. ON THE RUN

HELM RUSHED BACK TO ROOM 310. He had to wait until Makronotis had completed a radio conversation in Greek before he could speak.

"Secure communications with a scrambler system superior to NATO's," said the billionaire with relish. "One of my companies operates at the leading edge of technology."

"What's all this about Klara?" said Helm.

"She let you down very badly." Makronotis draped a severe expression across his jowls. "We have had no time to interrogate her properly but she was a major source of information for Gladwin. Everything she learned went straight to him."

"Where is she?"

"My uncle is looking after her at the villa. Until we decide what to do about the problem." Makronotis had the air of a well-fed hanging judge. "Unless you would care to handle it for me."

"How?" frowned Helm.

"I leave that to your discretion. What is your fee for such an assignment?"

"This one's on the house. I'll do it for nothing."

Makronotis heaved his bulk upright and crossed the room to a wall safe. He was swaying slightly, suggesting that he had consumed the boss' share of the champagne. He took a pistol, a clip of ammunition and a white-leather holster, all enclosed in a self-sealing plastic bag, out of the safe and handed the package to Helm.

The dark and silent aide showed Helm how to sort out the straps of the holster. The bulge seemed to lose itself in the folds of his anorak. He felt off-balance and strange wearing a gun.

"The weapon is untraceable," said Makronotis.

"I'll need something from you," said Helm. "To show your uncle. A sort of carte blanche."

"Placing me in the roll of Cardinal Richelieu?" smiled Makronotis. "And Miss Americott in the role of Lady de Winter. While you play the

noble Athos. You have read *The Three Musketeers*, I trust?"

"I saw the series of films they made on TV recently."

"A very pale shadow of the novel." Makronotis penned three lines on a sheet of Hotel Renga notepaper. "Will that suffice?"

Helm glanced at the signature below the Greek text, then he folded the sheet of paper and tucked it into his inside pocket. "I think so." He had no idea what Makronotis had written. It could have been a death warrant for himself, for all he knew. "I'll need a car."

Makronotis spoke to an aide in Greek. "One will be waiting in the car park. I suggest you keep your jacket zipped while you are in the city."

Helm pushed the double-column magazine into the handle of the pistol, which was a Beretta Model 92S, like the one that he had given to Demosthenes Taxacaris, the sculptor and summer hermit. He put the pistol into the holster without loading a round into the chamber, even though he knew all about safety catches now. He zipped his anorak, following orders, and tried to ignore the strange lump under his arm.

A royal blue Mercedes was waiting in the car park. As he headed out of Athens on the dark, Rafina road, Helm refused to ask himself what he had got himself into. Makronotis believed him to be an efficient assassin, a man whose own life was threatened by internal forces beyond his control, someone capable of taking the lives of others for money so that his own final days could become an orgy of living.

Five men had died by his actions in the first eleven days of September. He had killed only one by deliberate intent. Two men had died in a taxi because he had released the handle of a briefcase. He was sure now that Gladwin had added an explosive bonus to the incineration charge and shortened the fuse. He also suspected now that the notes had been forgeries and Gladwin had hidden the genuine million dollars.

Helm had shot one of the kidnappers with the same feeling of duty as someone putting down a mad dog. Another had died because he had attacked Helm with a knife and Helm had dumped him out of the wrong window by mistake. Even Gladwin's death had been a mistake. He had heard a shot and he had fired at the only visible target. He could hardly have anticipated Eva von Arlberg's incidental rescue mission while she had been on the trail of loot worth around two million dollars.

Robert Helm was in the same position as a soldier on armistice day. His war with the kidnappers was over and he felt able to live with every detail of his part in it. He had been manipulated and betrayed from the word go. The truth had been distributed like precious gems and he had received coloured glass most of the time.

Tsai's apparent betrayals of his trust were his own fault. He had made

unreasonable assumptions about her. At all times, she had remained loyal to her employer, no matter how much it inconvenienced Helm.

The most recent proof was the way she had got him to the Hotel Renga – perhaps she had even sneaked his passport out of his room. At the same time, he was almost sure that she would help him if he landed in trouble as desperate as Klara's – and as long as he posed no threat to her employer.

Graf Maximillian von Arlberg, his wife, Eva von Arlberg, the late Sigismund Morgenstern and Roger Gladwin had all used John Scott to further their own interests. The betrayals of everyone but Morgenstern had to be shrugged off as part of the game. As he approached the site of the shattered villa, Helm's thoughts turned back to Klara.

Sigismund Morgenstern, locked in his obsession, had played everything straight down the line with his instrument of salvation. Helm had assumed the same about Klara, who was supposed to be an ally of a fellow survivor of the earthquake and the hero of the robbery at the villa. She certainly had no reason to conspire against him with Roger Gladwin, of all people. There was a lot that didn't add up.

The alien lump between his left arm and his side reminded Helm at every contact how Phileros Makronotis expected him to respond to Klara's betrayal. As far as he could remember, a hooded executioner had chopped off Lady de Winter's head then tossed her body into a river. Makronotis seemed to be expecting the executioner's modern counterpart to use an untraceable Beretta pistol and the all-consuming sea.

Still with no clear intentions, Helm drove through the gap where the gates of the villa had been. Workmen had demolished most of the stone wall at the front so that it could be rebuilt around the new villa. A man with a torch hurried out of a transportable shed. When he saw the $\pi\mu$ logo on the windscreen sticker, he waved to the car and returned to his television set, trusting the visitor to get on with his business.

Helm investigated the dashboard. There was no torch. He noticed two suitcases on the back seat for the first time. There were two more locked cases in the boot. He found a long, four-battery torch in the toolkit.

The villa had been stabilized, which meant that everything that could fall had been pulled down. Salvaged items were grouped in the front courtyard. Most of them looked fit for the refuse tip or firewood. Helm walked cautiously down the side of the villa.

A great half-moon of cliff had dropped into the sea, along with the back of the villa. Someone had painted a white line across the broken flagstones three yards from the new cliff edge. Helm stayed well back from the warning line.

Metal scaffolding poles criss-crossed the central hall a foot above head height. The glass had been swept out and there were stars overhead. A water-proof emergency light glowed on a heap of stone blocks. Helm felt relatively happy about going down to the dungeon because it lay under the front part of the villa.

Ianos Makronotis and a uniformed chauffeur were playing cards and drinking wine near the steps. Klara, inevitably, was hanging on the wall, her toes the regulation half-inch from the stone floor. The two men finished the hand, slapping the cards onto their table with fierce competitiveness, before they looked at the visitor.

"You can go back to the hotel," said Helm. "I'm taking over here."

"Is that so, Mr. Helm?" the old man said in a challenging tone.

Helm tossed the *carte blanche* onto the card table and unzipped his anorak. He folded his arms with his right hand inside the jacket, gripping the butt of his pistol. One thing that he had learned was to say nothing and let other people make their own assumptions about his next move.

Ianos Makronotis read the note then shrugged. "Letting an outsider deal with the problem could be a better solution." He jerked his head toward the stairs and then drained his glass.

His driver gathered up the cards, put his peaked cap on and mounted the stairs, buttoning his jacket. Helm noticed that he was wearing riding boots, like a proper chauffeur. He went upstairs to watch the car leave, waved to the man in the hut, who had come to the door to find out what was happening, then he returned to the dungeon.

"Been here long?" he remarked as he paid rope through the pulley.

"Hours." Klara sagged onto a chair, which he had dragged over from the card table. "I didn't believe you when you said that old son of a bitch did this to you."

"You're a full member of his club now."

"So what happens now, John?"

"Everyone's been calling me Robert recently. Or Mr. Helm." He collected the *carte blanche* from the table, "Translate that for me."

"It is by my order and for the good of the company, that the bearer of this, John Scott or Robert Helm, has done what he has done. Makronotis.' Is this a quote from something? It sure reads like one."

"Like *The Three Musketeers*?"

"Yeah, of course. You could do anything with this, John."

"Yes, he said it made him feel like Cardinal Richelieu. And you're cast as Lady de Winter. Remember what happened to her?"

Klara's eyes opened wider in fear. Colour drained from her tanned face.

"Hey, relax." Helm brought the other chair, the bottle and two clean

glasses from a box, then sat facing her. "Suppose you tell me just what the hell you've been up to?"

Klara stopped rubbing her wrists long enough to take a swallow of the mellow, red wine. She had an air of resignation. "Roger Gladwin told me you were going to try to steal the things you rescued from the villa. Of course, I didn't believe him – until he told me you only have a short time to live and any sort of risk meant nothing to you. And there was your lunch with Eva von Arlberg. Gladwin said you were using her contacts to sell the things."

"Yeah, he was a pretty plausible guy."

"I didn't want to believe him, John." Klara leaned toward him to underline the urgency of her assurance. "I wanted to help you. But everything you told me last night at the hut backed up what Gladwin had said. And when I told him you saw him selling something that was in the van, he said that was just you trying to blur the responsibility for things that had gone missing."

"That must have been what sent him round to grab me out of Kaiser's trap. To shut up an inconvenient witness."

"He said you might have left something behind to incriminate him. And it might be safer if he joined in your deal with the Arlberg woman. Then he said I'd better come in too. He told me it would mean another half a million dollars for us, because he's make sure the Arlberg woman didn't cheat you. We'd have more than enough to stay ahead of Mr. Makronotis for however long you have left. And he said it was an ideal time to do it, while Mr. Makronotis was concentrating on the kidnappers."

"In effect, you were seduced by all that money?"

"I guess I went a little crazy," Klara admitted.

"There's no need to be embarrassed about it. I went a lot crazy when he paid me twenty-five thousand quid in cash for the first job. God knows what I'd have done if old Makronotis had offered me half a million."

"Gladwin also wanted to know if Kaiser suspected he was helping you. When he called me this afternoon, I told Gladwin I thought Tsai was looking for him."

"She found him, too." Helm sketched the events of the afternoon.

Klara dropped her glass onto the stone floor when she realized what could have happened to Helm and Tsai.

Helm shrugged. "It's okay. Everything's cool. Eva steamed in to save the day. So let me get this straight. You weren't in on the fun and games with the ransom payment? Just the plan to stroll off with the van and its contents?"

"That's about it," Klara admitted. "So what happens now, John? Over

the cliff in the dark? Or are you going to use that gun you're wearing first?"

"You can tell I've got one? I thought shoulder holsters are supposed to be pretty undetectable."

"I've been around enough guys with guns to spot them. You didn't answer my question."

"I'm only wearing the gun because Makronotis gave it to me. It was easier to put it on than argue. And I'm not about to use it on you, no matter what. It must be transparently obvious I fancied you from the moment we met. I don't have a problem with what you've done. Okay, you were conned – but by an expert. Who's been conning me every day of the week for the last month. And Makronotis, too. Your only problem, as far as I'm concerned, is how to get you out of this mess."

"Mr. Makronotis won't let you. He wants to make an example of me."

"He left that in my hands, though. Hence the carte blanche. Look, Klara, you're not scared of me, surely?"

"What do you think?"

"Okay, I see your point," Helm admitted. "It seems like I've known you for ages, but it's only been just over a week. For all you know, I could be as devious as, say, Gladwin. And for all I know, you could be the same. So I'm going to do the most dangerous thing you can ever do. I'm going to give this gun to someone who's scared of me."

Helm drew the Beretta pistol from his shoulder holster and made Klara take it. Then he raised his hands. "I did this with Tsai about three hours ago, only I made her give me the gun. You know how to put a round up the spout?"

"This is ridiculous," said Klara.

"Isn't it? But necessary if we're to get clear what's important. And that has to be sticking together and working together to make the most of what we have left in the way of a life. But if you don't agree, there's a car up there with the keys in it. And if you don't fancy shooting me, because it can be a bit noisy, you can always lock me in down here."

"John, put your hands down. And put this away." Klara returned the pistol.

Helm stuffed it back into his holster. "That's just what I did. Gave the gun back to Tsai as an expression of mutual confidence. To prove we're on the same side. Tell you what, I'd have looked a proper chump if you'd shot me and strolled off with the car."

"If I did, I'd faint from the sight of the blood and I'd never get away."

"I didn't think of that. Hey, I've just thought of somewhere to hide you. A studio flat in Valaki. It's so obvious, no one will think of looking there."

Klara was wearing a cream dress with a dark blue border. She was

highly visible in the light streaming out of the watchman's hut. She took her shoes off, sprinted over to the car and crouched beside it. Helm walked openly across the courtyard and unlocked the doors. Klara crouched in front of the front passenger seat. The watchman came to the door of his hut when they closed their doors together on a count of three. Helm lifted a hand and called "Kalinikhta!" though the open window.

The watchman returned his good-night and went back to his television. Helm turned left onto the coast road. He could turn inland for Koropi after ten kilometres, and cross the peninsula to Valaki without going anywhere near Athens. Klara wriggled up onto her seat and began a contortionist act with a bare foot.

"What are you doing?" frowned Helm.

"I cut my foot."

Helm stopped the car and switched on the interior light. A quarter-inch gash in Klara's big toe was weeping freely. He offered a clean handkerchief.

"Those are mine!" Klara had noticed the suitcases on the back seat.

"Are they? There are two more like them in the boot."

"Looks like you were supposed to get rid of all traces of me," said Klara nervously.

"It just means we won't have to go shopping as soon as we get out of here. Look, my stuff's here too." Helm's cabin bag and his flight bag were on the floor between the seats. "You'd never guess it's been though an earthquake."

"So you can split when you've dealt with me."

"I'd have a job without a passport. But there's no link to Makronotis if I've got my stuff with me. But it does mean I can give you some antiseptic and a bandage from my medical kit."

Helm got out of the car and turned his back while Klara took her tights off. He was surprised to see the lights of another vehicle approaching. He had become used to solitude off the main roads at night. The other car stopped. The interior light showed him police uniforms.

Helm was wondering how to say 'My friend has cut her foot' in Greek when he realized that his friend could speak the language fluently. He was on the point of giving the cops a friendly 'Ya sue!' when one of them pointed an Italian-made submachine gun at him. Helm put his hands up quickly.

"John, they want your passport," said Klara. She raised her hands with a ball of bloodstained cotton wool in one of them.

"Tell them Makronotis has got it," said Helm.

The cops seemed mildly impressed by the magic name.

"Tell them I'm working for him. Tell them about my *carte blanche*."

One of the cops found the shoulder holster. He disarmed Helm with a grunt of deep satisfaction. He took the note from Phileros Makronotis over to his car. He held a radio conversation full of long pauses.

Suspicious scowls turned to friendly smiles. Helm and Klara put their hands down when the cops slung their submachine guns on their shoulders. Helm returned his *carte blanche* to his inside pocket. He was amazed when the cop returned his gun.

"Are we allowed to tip Greek cops?" he asked Klara.

"They'll take a present from Mr. Makronotis," she told him.

Helm handed over a 5,000 drachma note. The cop pocketed it and shook Helm's hand warmly. His colleague smiled in expectation. Helm parted with another 5,000 drachmas. The incident had cost him about £40.

The police car drove off. The encounter had been nerve-racking but useful. Some policemen still thought that John Scott was public enemy number one, but if they could be persuaded to check up before shooting, everything would be all right. As he stared out from the edge of the road at the dark sea and the lights of half a dozen boats, Helm felt that it was a big 'if'.

He tried to imagine what would have happened if he had been checked by British bobbies. There would have been no guns to point at him for a start. British coppers wouldn't have returned his gun, either. If they didn't arrest him on the spot, they'd tell him to collect it at the police station on production of a valid firearms licence. In either case, there'd be no reason to offer a tip.

Klara called him back to the car. She had changed into jeans and a long-sleeved, denim shirt, which seemed a good idea with a wind from the sea cooling the coast as midnight approached. Klara had found her handbag in one of the cases. She tackled a ragged nail with an emery board as Helm moved off.

Helm drove as fast as the dark, bumpy road would allow. It was a small surprise to realize that Klara hadn't fainted at the sight of blood. She'd just got on with repairing the damage. Perhaps she too had become toughened by her recent scary experiences, Helm told himself. There was a lot of it about.

The road improved beyond Koropi but there was the added hazard of Saturday night Kamikazes. He had to park the car some distance from the flat in Valaki. The people downstairs were having a wild party. He and Klara had to step over a couple welded together on the staircase. Klara sagged gratefully onto a chair in the studio.

"How's your foot?" said Helm.

"Throbs a bit when I walk on it," said Klara.

"There's some Greek brandy around somewhere. It's not too poisonous. Kills germs internally as well as externally." Helm poured a drink for his guest. "I thought you fainted at the sight of blood. You did okay with your foot."

"I guess I had too much else to think of," Klara realized.

Helm went out for more luggage. If someone strolled off with a highly desirable Mercedes, that was Phileros Makronotis' loss. The luggage wasn't so readily replaceable. Helm climbed over the couple on the stairs twice without interrupting them. He took a big drink of mineral water before sitting down with a glass of brandy.

"Your cases are going to cost a fortune in excess baggage when we fly out of here," he remarked. "Have you got any cash on you?"

"Not much. Less than you gave the cops," said Klara. "I've got plenty in the bank. If it hasn't been frozen. But there's a big problem. Mr. Makronotis still has my passport."

"I reckon he's collecting them. He's still got mine."

"Yes, you said. Have you got any money?"

"Tons in the bank. And maybe a couple of thousand bucks on me. All we have to do is lie low for one day, till the banks open on Monday."

"John, this is really dangerous for you. Like I told you, Mr. Makronotis wants to make an example of me. Getting me out of the country won't be enough."

"He left it to my discretion. I told you that."

"That's no reason why he can't send someone else to do a better job if he's not satisfied."

"All you're guilty of is faulty judgement. You trusted Gladwin. Something Makronotis has been doing for years. But no harm's been done. All he's lost is two grotty jade statues. Nothing much compared to what the earthquake did to his zillion-dollar villa. And everything's insured."

"The gang got away with another half-million dollars in antiques and things after you rescued me, John."

"Bloody hell!" gaped Helm. "How much stuff did he have there? Anyway, giving you the sack should be punishment enough. If any's necessary. That's all that happened to the maid who got his granddaughter kidnapped."

"John, I let you down, too. His one-man assassination squad. I know you only ever killed the kidnapers in self-defence but Mr. Makronotis won't believe that."

"Maybe it's just as well in the circumstance. I wonder if I can corrupt Tsai into burgling the boss' safe to get our passports back?"

"I doubt it, John."

"Me too." Helm stopped for a mighty yawn. "Look at me, worn out

and it's only twenty past twelve on Saturday night."

"Look how much has happened to you today," Klara topped up her glass. Helm noticed that the level in the brandy bottle had gone down dramatically. "What about sleeping arrangements?"

"If we can get any with all that row going on downstairs," yawned Helm. "You have the bedroom. I'll put the hammock up in here – just in case any of Makronotis' security advisors come strolling in to take me over from Gladwin. I reckon the first thing they learn is how to get past locked doors."

Helm rolled out of his hammock at half-past eight on Sunday morning, driven out of sleep eventually by the off-key clanking of what sounded like a cracked church bell. Klara was still there, and fast asleep, when he looked into the bedroom. Helm had toast and coffee for breakfast, with a double ration of iron capsules to make up some of the lost ground, then he settled down with one of his paperbacks. Despite the events of the previous day, and the loss of another life, no bad-dream demons had visited him in the night. He took that as further proof that a normal person can choose to survive at an aggressor's expense without becoming paralyzed by guilt.

Klara had a pretty good hangover. She appeared, half-awake and suffering, in the middle of the morning. Helm gave her some orange juice and aspirins, and told her to go back to sleep. Lunch for one at a café down the street involved the usual mixture of primitive Greek, apologetic smiles and pointing.

Klara was looking a little pale behind her tan when she joined Helm on the flat part of the roof during his afternoon coffee break. She was feeling well enough now, and she had painted her nails the customary defiant blood red. Helm retuned his radio to Radio Athens as an act of reflex paranoia. Now that his Greek translator was available, he could find out from the next news bulletin if he was wanted by the police for aiding and abetting a fugitive from the wrath of Phileros Makronotis.

Klara had a few aches, but none was deliberately self-inflicted. Her wrists were still sore, her foot throbbed when she walked but her headache had gone and she was able to polish off a snack of toast and coffee. Helm's larder had little else to offer apart from wine, brandy and mineral water.

There was no mention of John Scott on the radio news. There was no room for him on the early evening television news when the sound portion drifted over from their neighbour. The main item was the story of a group of terrorists, who had blown themselves up with their own bomb in a house half-way between Athens and Piraeus.

At least six bodies had been found in the wreckage. The police had

determined their number by counting heads – quite literally – and cross-checked with hands and feet. The bomb had done as much damage to the occupants as to the house itself, parts of which had been found 200 metres away.

“That should put old Makronotis in a good mood,” Helm remarked when the newsreader moved on to another item and Klara finished her translation. “Maybe good enough to forget about you if Tsai can find the vanload of junk.”

“Junk?” frowned Klara.

“I wouldn’t want to hang on to any of the bits I’ve seen. I looked at some paintings in one of the boxes. They didn’t look half as good as mine.”

“*Good* is what people will pay a lot of money for, John. Not what you and I like.”

“True enough. But even if I had fifty million dollars, I’d never pay fifty thousand for that statue Eva won. You know, I was going to ask Makronotis if he could give you some time off so you can show me a bit more of Greece.”

“I’m likely to have all the time in the world if he’s put me on his blacklist.”

“You mean he would? I mean, you think he could enforce it if you went back to the States? Or came home with me?”

“Greeks are as bad as Italians for vendettas,” Klara said gloomily.

“You mean, he’d buy a firm just for the pleasure of giving you the sack?”

“He did it to two guys who swindled him.”

“You didn’t swindle him.” Helm stifled a yawn. He could feel one of his rapid, evening declines coming on.

“So how come he’s looking for a van worth one point eight million buck?” Klara pointed out.

“Because he’s no bloody good at vetting his security advisors. Still, you can always join a feminist legal firm and say the real reason he’s got it in for you is you wouldn’t let him get away with sexual harassment. You know what these Europeans are like, especially in a hot climate. Randy as hell.”

“Present company included?” Klara gave Helm an arch smile.

“No woman who looks as good as you is safe around me,” he agreed with a yawn. “Let’s go for some dinner.”

“You sound like you belong in bed. Are you okay?”

“Thanks for the offer but I’ve only run out of energy. I’ll be okay after some grub. Then we can think what to do with you.”

“I’m dangerous to have around, John. It might be safer for you to do what Mr. Makronotis wants.”

"Sod him! And if you're worried about me sneaking up on you with anything other than carnal intent, the gun's handing up in the studio, behind one of my paintings."

"The school of Mondrian? You did them?"

"Brilliant, aren't they? Better than anything Makronotis had in his villa. That's an idea. If anyone asks who you are, I can tell them you're my model. The advantage of being in Greece in September and temperatures in the eighties is your nude model doesn't get goose pimples."

"Are you really a painter?"

"The advantage of abstract art is anyone can do it, even if you gave up painting after primary school and you can't draw for toffee."

"I'm not sure I'm flattered, being a model for abstract art."

"I can get my inspiration from looking at you in a tasteful pose."

"You reckon I've got the figure for it?" said Klara with a chaste smile.

"Definitely. You're still young and luscious."

"A friend of mine at college reckoned old age starts when your age catches up with your bust measurement."

"I heard it was your inside leg measurement. Anyway, you've still got a year or two to go yet before you're ancient."

"Three."

"If I had a tape measure, I could find out how old you are."

"If you want to know, I'll tell you. If I haven't already."

"No, it's okay. I think couples should keep some things secret from each other. I wonder if that's why some film stars have them enlarged? Worried about getting old."

"Two surgical balloons and a little pump to use on your birthday?" laughed Klara.

"You'd have to carry lots of small change in your pockets when you get to a hundred, or you'd be drifting round the room like a double-barrelled Zeppelin. Come on," Helm yawned again, "let's go and do some serious eating before I flake out."

Helm and Klara had a leisurely meal at the café, then they moved out onto the terrace to watch the virtually tideless sea lap snowy, white sand. Then they retired to the roof of the studio flat. Helm was yawning again when the Moon collided with the lighthouse on Salamis at ten-thirty. Their best escape plan involved buying a cabin cruiser, sailing across the Aegean to Turkey, and sinking the boat within an easy swim of the shore. If they could reach their respective embassies in Istanbul as distressed mariners, they would be able to obtain temporary travel documents. It was a variant of Helm's earlier escape plan via Rome.

A crash woke them while the night was still black. Helm sat up in the bed, heart racing. Someone was in the studio and he had left his gun hanging behind one of the pictures.

20. SCOTT'S FIRST STAND

KLARA'S FINGERS CLOSED on his arm with hysterical force. Helm gasped and levered them off. He held a finger to her lips, then slid out of the bed. He tried to cross the creaky floor with the minimum number of steps. There was a shape kneeling before the studio couch, groping for a torch. A female whisper was swearing fluently in French. Helm switched on the light.

"What the hell are you *doing?*" he demanded.

Tsai Yuan-lin broke into a broad grin. "Forget your pants, Johnny?"

Helm realized that he was covered in nothing more than his own confusion. He dashed back into the bedroom to pull on his jeans, taking great care with the zip. Tsai followed him, switching on the light. She stopped to stare at Klara.

"Come in and sit down, why don't you?" Helm moved the rest of his clothes onto the bed and sat down beside them.

Tsai perched on the chair, frowning in bafflement. "I thought you mad with Amercott?"

"She's been on my side all along," said Helm. "She was keeping tabs on Gladwin and Erlich for me. But no one gave her a chance to say so."

"Oh, yeah?" said Tsai suspiciously.

"We're looking for the million dollars," Helm improvised.

"What million dollars?" frowned Tsai.

"Gladwin as good as told me Erlich swapped forgeries for the ransom money when little what's-her-name got kidnapped. From what we know about him now, there's a good chance the million didn't get blown up because he hung on to it."

"You not tell Mr. Makronotis, Johnny."

"For several very good reasons. Number one of them being that we don't have much to go on. As for number two, after my experience with my mate Roger Gladwin, I don't trust any of the other security advisors. And number three, if I told Makronotis I thought his million bucks was floating around somewhere, he'd only ask me what I'm doing ponsing

around and not going and getting it for him. And tag an 'or else' onto the end of it."

"Maybe," Tsai admitted.

"Come off it. You know bloody well there's no *maybe* about it. You know how Makronotis operates. If I can't find the cash, he'll only assume I've hidden it somewhere and I'm planning to stroll back for it later. So wouldn't you have done the same? Say nothing in case you don't find anything?"

"Maybe."

"I'll take that as an affirmative."

"What you do with Amercott?"

"Now you've found his vanload of treasure, I thought old Makronotis might be persuaded to give us our passports back and just let us split."

"One problem, Johnny. Not find treasure."

"You what!?" Helm's expression of outrage softened into a slow grin.

"I get it. You're playing the heart-attack game. Where did you find it."

"For real. Not find treasure. Come here to look for clue."

"But you *must* have! It must be somewhere within a mile or so of Koropi at the most, if it's not in the town. He didn't have *time* to go anywhere else."

"Not in town. You sure you not got it?"

"Do you want to search me? Or give me a lie-detector test? Or let Doctor Whatsit hypnotize me again?"

"No, I believe you," said Tsai. "So treasure lost? Only Gladwin know where it go?"

"Unless Klara can remember something he said that might give us a clue. Or I can. You can tell that to your boss. It might stop him sending someone to shoot Klara. Someone who doesn't trip over the furniture."

"Trip at hole in carpet," Tsai admitted. "Fall into easel."

"You didn't hurt yourself?"

"No, okay. Easel bit bent."

"I might have shot you by mistake."

"What with?" laughed Tsai. "That gun in pocket, Johnny, or just pleased to see me?"

"I have got one, you know. Makronotis gave me one."

"You not shoot first. You always wait one second too long. You not trained. You not shoot Gladwin until after you think he shoot you."

"I did shoot him in the end, though. Remember that."

"I know. That why us good guys still alive. Phone me tomorrow? If you think of something? At hotel?"

"You're not trying to check up on me?" grinned Helm. "We can't go anywhere without our passports, can we?"

Tsai gave him a calculating look. "Maybe you think of something."

Helm saw her to the door, then he retrieved the pistol from behind the picture. Klara pulled a face as he put it under his pillow.

"Are you expecting more visitors?"

"No, but someone else might just think it's worth grilling me about the two or three million that's up for grabs. I prefer to tell them to get lost from a position of strength."

"Do you often get women calling on you at three in the morning?"

"Not often enough. Have you met Tsai before?"

"Only on the phone a couple of times. How well do you know her?"

"She's never dragged me into bed, if that's what you mean. We've been chained up together a couple of times, though."

"So we've been working together all along?" said Klara. "Do you reckon Mr. Makronotis will buy that?"

"He'll buy whatever suits him. And what does he know for sure? They didn't grill you, did they?"

"No one said a word. They just showed me some photos of me talking to Gladwin, and played me some bits of recordings of conversations, then they hauled me off to the wreck of the villa. That was the most frightening part of it, their silence."

"Right," nodded Helm. "They just put their own interpretation on the compromising material. They didn't bother getting your side of things because they thought they knew it. Greek macho men. They know it all. And with Gladwin dead, they can't check back with him on what we tell them. So Mr. Makronotis might just believe us if we can back it up with some loot."

"You reckon you'll get a finder's fee on the million?"

"I don't care about a finder's fee. Why does everyone assume I do everything for money?" Helm said indignantly.

"John, I saw your advertisement," said Klara.

"That was me a month ago. Too much has happened for me to be the same person. Look, why doesn't Makronotis do his own dirty work? Because he's worth a billion dollars and he doesn't have to. I didn't have the best part of two hundred thousand quid in various banks a month ago. I can hardly believe I've got it even now. But it means I can pick and choose what risks I take. Or it *should* mean that."

"So why don't you walk away from me?"

"You know when we first met? Ten whole days ago? You told me you'd been assigned to me. You know why? I bet Gladwin fed my details into a computer and asked for a match, like with a dating computer. That's why we get on so well together. And that's why I'm still here. You saw the advert. That's why you can believe me when I say we get out together or not at all."

"Yeah, but . . ." A massive yawn stopped Klara.

"I think we'd better continue this in the morning," said Helm with a matching yawn.

"But we will continue it, John. So you reckon our flying start was thanks to the Gladwin Dating Agency?"

"Stranger things have happened at sea. But not much, I'll bet."

Klara started sneezing while she was getting dressed, later that morning. Helm bought a large box of tissues when he shopped for breakfast, hoping that he would avoid her summer cold. After cheese on toast and coffee, they drove to Piraeus.

The Mercedes had one of the *any-day access* stickers on the wind-screen but Helm felt safer going into Athens on the bus. Klara had scraped her froth of brunette hair into a bun and covered it with a floppy sun hat. Her sunglasses and the tissue ever ready to catch a sneeze were a partial disguise.

Helm had wanted to leave her at the flat but Klara felt safe only when they were together, and she wanted to go to a particular pharmacy in the city to buy a proprietary cold-control preparation, which looked a lot like Helm's iron capsules. Their next stop was the central post office. Helm used Bruce Dundee's driving licence as proof of identity and recovered the envelope containing his Australian passport.

"If only your friend Mr. Morgenstern was still alive," said Klara as she flicked through the passport at a café. "The picture looks just like you, but there's something different about the face."

"I was sucking my cheeks in so it would look like I've put on some weight since the photo was taken," Helm explained. "I'm supposed to have had the passport for a couple of years, not since last Tuesday. Hang about!"

"I'm hanging," mumbled Klara between gushes into a tissue. She used a linen handkerchief to dab at streaming eyes. The capsule was taking its time about working.

"All we have to do is get married."

"I thought you weren't the marrying kind, John? And you hardly know me. Didn't your last relationship break up after eighteen months because you're not ready to get married? And that was only about three months ago."

"What I mean is, all we have to do is put you in the passport in the spaces for my wife, as if we're a pair of cheapskates who've only got the one passport between us. Then we can disappear. Makronotis won't have his spies looking for a Mr. and Mrs. Dundee strolling out of the country."

"You expect the Australian embassy to put me on this passport as your wife?"

"No, I was planning to have it done privately. The way old Morgenstern got my details on what must have been a blank Australian passport."

"You know someone who could do it?" said Klara cautiously, not daring to hope too much.

"All the people who've done it for me in the past are dead. Pity."

"John, you'll be in the same trouble as me if we disappear. Who'll square it with Mr. Makronotis? He'll send someone after us."

"If it's the only chance you've got of getting out of here, we're going to take it," Helm said firmly. "And it's a big world and we've got the cash in my deposit box. Surely it'd be better to spend it than wait around here, being messed about for who knows how long? And do you really think I could live with myself if I walked away from you?"

"You could try real hard," Klara suggested. "You don't have to be my knight in shining armour."

"I didn't have to put that advert in the paper," Helm pointed out. "I didn't have to help to write off the kidnappers. Well, no, I had no choice about that. But I didn't have to help to write off the von Arlberg cryostore. If you're there, you just get caught up in these things. As I got caught up with you. Unless . . ."

"What?" said Klara.

"A wild idea," grinned Helm. "Let's get to the bank."

Mr. Dundee was the day's first caller at the deposit vault. Helm cleared out his box while Klara tried not to stare at a wad of pictures of a dead president. On the way out of the vault, Helm got Klara to ask the attendant if he could make an urgent business call to Austria. He was shown to a quiet area of the main office. German-speaking Klara played the role of secretary to guide the call through the exchange at Schloß Arlberg to Eva's apartment.

"I thought I had heard the last from you for some time," said Eva when Klara handed the receiver to Helm. He held it so that Klara could listen in on the call. "You have spent that five thousand dollars already?"

"I've got a lot of expenses at the moment," said Helm.

"And you want me to rush to Athens with more?"

"That's up to you, darling. I enjoyed our lunch on Friday. And I'm going to be back at that café today, by coincidence."

"I can bring no more than five thousand dollars."

"Try real hard for ten," said Helm firmly.

"I will meet you at the café at twelve-thirty," said Eva.

"My God!" said Klara when Helm replaced the receiver. "I hope no one was listening to that. Using the bank's phone to *blackmail* someone."

"Ah, but someone was listening. But at her end. If you knew Eva,

you'd be able to read the hidden message. She hasn't told her old man she burned my blackmail evidence. He must be recording all calls to the castle. She also wanted an excuse to come to Athens."

"Will she bring your ten grand?"

"If she screws that much out of Daddy, it's strictly for her own benefit. The thing about Eva is she's always playing games. Remember – if she tells you something that makes you want to strangle me, just say, 'Oh, how interesting.' And let me do the talking. Don't let her get under your skin."

Klara sneezed into a tissue by way of reply. Helm caught the eye of one of the bank's staff and paid for the call plus FPA, the Greek for VAT. They caught another bus back to Piraeus, reclaimed the car and headed west to Daphni on the coast to lie low. They had an hour and a half to kill before lunch with Eva von Arlberg.

Eva, in a loose creation of yellow silk, had dressed up for the occasion. Klara, in jeans and a simple cotton blouse, looked as if she might have dressed down deliberately. Helm, in white trousers and a pale blue and white striped shirt, carried his white jacket so that he could flash his Makronotis organization cuff-links at the café's staff. The $\pi\mu$ logo proved that he was a person of some standing in Athens.

Eva complimented Klara on the practicality of her outfit, and asked her if she had been ill. The capsule had dried up Klara's runny nose but her eyes were still swollen. Helm told Eva that no one looks her best with a cold. Eva contradicted him with a superior smile. Klara got her own back with a display of faultless Greek, which became equally fluent German seamlessly when Eva addressed the waiter in her own language.

"Did you bring my ten grand?" said Helm when the hors d'oeuvres had been delivered and the linguists had stopped showing off.

"Daddy paid up like a lamb," beamed Eva. "He even let me use the Learjet to come here. It could not have worked out better. Remember your second present?" She glanced from her silver dragonfly to Klara's dolphin.

"The jade statue?" said Helm, proving that he had no big secrets from Klara.

"A dealer in Rome offered me eighty thousand dollars for it! You gave me the perfect excuse to come here to collect it. Flying home via Rome is about the same distance. All I need is a tall, dark man to go with me as a bodyguard."

"What about one of the guys you took to Vaduz to kidnap me?"

"Don't be silly, darling. They tell everything to Daddy. I have the jet at the airport. You could be back here by six o'clock."

"Only one problem," smiled Helm. "Makronotis wants me to stand by

for a special job in a few days' time. He's got our passports to get some visas. And to make sure we don't sneak off somewhere."

Eva muttered something uncomplimentary in German. Klara looked shocked.

"But there's a way we could work it," Helm said thoughtfully. "I've got a spare passport. If you've got a contact here who could put Klara on it as my wife, we could have a couple of days in Rome. It'd be nice to put one over on that old sod Makronotis."

"Maybe the first time for a long time anyone did," said Klara.

"I think I know someone who could do it for two or three hundred dollars," said Eva with a conspiratorial smile.

"And you got ten thousand from Daddy," smiled Helm.

"Order something for me, darling. I must telephone."

"So what's this job you're doing for Mr. Makronotis?" Klara murmured suspiciously when they were alone.

"We're playing a game, darling, remember?" Helm said patiently. "Don't believe a word either of us says. What would you recommend for a girl with a hearty appetite?"

"A guillotine?" said Klara with a sweet smile.

"Play the game, darling. We have to order something to impress her. Even if she won't admit it."

Eva demolished her dish of spiced lamb in high spirits and went without a dessert to bring the meal to an early end. She drove the Mercedes to the Monastiraki district, covering the mile and a half twice as fast as Helm could have managed. Their destination was a souvenir shop full of plastic statues with a stone finish and fibreglass models of the Parthenon and other ancient structures.

Eva and her party drifted through the tourists in the shop, and through a bead curtain at the back. They crossed a crowded storeroom to a trapdoor and descended steep, stone steps to a cellar room. A middle-aged man with short, blond hair like Dieter Erlich's bowed over Eva's hand and clicked his heels. They spoke in German. Helm kept an eye on Klara, watching in case she heard anything suspicious.

Werner examined the Australian passport closely. He seemed satisfied with its quality. He let Klara comb out her hair, and he spent a long time fussing with lights before taking the photograph. He took the camera through a black door to his darkroom. Eva began to sort through a box of wartime postcards, looking for material to add to her collection of Nazibilia. Helm and Klara amused themselves by looking at her discards.

The job took less than half an hour. When they saw the final result in their joint passport, Helm and Klara had to admit that Werner was a master craftsman. He had done wonders with Klara's eyes to eliminate

the effects of her cold. Eva counted \$500 onto the workbench to pay for the forgery and her postcards. Werner shook hands all round but only Eva received a bow and a click of his heels.

"Second-generation Nazi," Eva remarked on the way back to the car. "Werner is a marvellous source of all sorts of documents from family archives and personal trinkets owned by important people. I had my Knight's Cross with diamonds from him."

"I'm surprised he had the stamps for an Australian passport," said Helm.

"There are a lot of Greeks in Australia now," said Klara. "I guess they have their share of illegal immigrants. It's a pretty big country. If you can get in, you can disappear easily enough."

"Yes, I didn't think of that," said Helm.

"Where are we going now, darling?" Eva cut across the other woman's point in the game of one-upmanship.

"Klara had better have her hair trimmed so she doesn't look exactly like a passport photo that's supposed to be a couple of years old," said Helm. "And she needs a wedding ring. Our flat in Valaki's on the way to the airport. Let's move, girls."

The new Klara packed in minutes when they reached the flat. There was room in her largest case for Helm's suit carrier. Klara jumped into a dress while Helm was moving her cases to the car. She claimed his flight bag as her personal hand luggage. The von Arlberg Learjet was standing by, parked well away from the main passenger terminal and any spies watching for Helm and Klara.

A uniformed steward served coffee as the jet reached cruising height. A video of a science fiction epic was just ending when the seat-belt light came on. The jet landed at Ciampino airport in preference to Leonardo da Vinci. The main international airport lies twice as far from Rome as Ciampino.

After a relatively quick passage through customs and immigration, a car whisked Eva and her guest along the meandering New Appian Way to the old city wall. They followed a tram route along the Via Merulana to the Via Principe Amadeo. Mr. and Mrs. Dundee booked a suite at the four-star Hotel Mestre. Depositing \$114,000 in the hotel safe convinced the receptionist that the artificial Australians were unlikely to sneak away without paying their bill.

Leaving Klara unpacking, Helm returned to the car and his mission for Eva. He was wearing the jacket of his white suit and a pale blue tie with the von Arlberg crest, which Eva had given him on the family Learjet. Eva had the jade statuette in her capacious handbag, which the customs officer had neglected to examine.

The hired car followed a trolley bus route along the Via Nazionale, then it turned off down the Via Martius, where the *élite* shop lay.

"Remember, darling, say nothing," Eva coached on the way. "I will speak to you in German. If I end with *nicht wahr?*, you will nod. If not, you will shake your head and say *unmöglich*. Than means impossible. You are very, very tough and you will accept only the price you want. Okay?"

"Got it," nodded Helm. "No smiling, either?"

"Look as if you watch everything and you will miss nothing."

To Helm's surprise, Eva carried out her transaction in the open, in a corner of the shop. There was no hiding in a back room for her. Helm kept repeating *unmöglich* in his mind to be sure of the pronunciation. Part of him wanted to be nervous but a majority knew that the job was a piece of cake compared to what he had been required to do recently.

Eva placed the jade statuette on a black velvet mat on a glass table and discussed it with a thin, middle-aged man with a centre parting in his thinning, black hair. The man seemed a lot more impressed by the statuette than Helm had ever been.

Helm sat with his back to a display cabinet, keeping his eyes in constant motion, inspecting each arrival at the glass front doors and members of staff as they passed into and out of the security vault at the rear of the shop. He shook his head twice, making the gesture as abrupt as possible, and threw away the *unmöglich* as a muttered expression of contempt.

There was a pleading note in Eva's voice before she gave him the cue to nod. Helm did so as grudgingly as possible. Eva left the shop with a handbag full of money. She made Helm a double millionaire in lire, saving him the trouble of changing a thousand-dollar bill into the local currency. The car took her straight to the airport.

Helm waved goodbye to the Learjet, then he directed the car back to the Hotel Mestre. The driver asked if the bill should be sent to the hotel. Eva had scored again in her game by leaving Helm stuck with the bill for her transport. Helm surrendered to the inevitable and asked the driver to wait for him.

Klara's calculator told him that his commission from Eva was worth about \$1,400, less the bill for the car. Helm made Klara a lire-millionaire, exchanged brief but passionate goodbyes and dashed back to the car. Twenty minutes later, at Leonardo da Vinci airport, he gave the driver a tip of 25,000 lire without knowing exactly how much it was. He was just in time to obey the last call for the 17:00 hours flight to Athens. Klara had bought his ticket through the hotel. As his only luggage was a paperback book, he sailed through the security checks.

Eva had promised to get him home by six o'clock. Helm parked his

car at the rear staircase to his flat at one minute to seven. He had made good time, considering the side trip to have his Australian passport embellished and having to take a scheduled flight back to Greece. He realized that Eva hadn't asked him why he had telephoned her. She had been so involved in her own plots and plans that he had not needed to come up with a good reason for using her contacts with the illegal document trade.

After a walk on the snowy beach to shake off the inactivity of a long flight, he went to the café for a solitary meal of grilled red mullet and bread studded with sesame seeds. He had become a regular man of action, he told himself. He and Klara had spent many hours discussing how to get her out of the country to safety. They had solved the problem very neatly in a few minutes by letting Eva think that she was using them.

Another significant change was the way he reduced multi-zeroed foreign currencies to dollars rather than sterling to make them comprehensible – not that the numbers meant much even then. He could scarcely believe that Robert Helm and his girlfriend had been wandering around carrying over a hundred thousand dollars in cash.

It was so wildly beyond his normal experience as to be incredible. So were all the schemes to save Klara for the rather selfish motive of being able to enjoy his last fling with her if the news from Phileros Makronotis became good but that from his doctor was bad. Lost in thought, he plodded up the stairs and let himself into the flat. Two men grabbed him as soon as he entered the studio area.

Helm stopped struggling against impossible odds when he saw the ancient figure of Ianos Makronotis watching him from inside the bedroom. Tsai stepped into view, holding his white-leather shoulder holster.

"If the gun is not under your pillow or on your person, it must be hidden in your car," said Ianos Makronotis.

Helm shrugged as much as his captors would let him. "So what?" he said, not giving anything away.

"Where is Miss Amercott?" The old man waved the bodyguards away with a outward flap of both hands and strutted over to Helm.

"Out for a walk," said Helm.

"Carrying four heavy suitcases for exercise?"

"All right, I moved her."

"You failed to telephone Miss Yuan-lin."

"I said I'd phone her when I had anything to tell her."

"You said you would telephone today."

Helm looked at his watch. "It's now three minutes past eight in the evening so there's a lot of today left."

"I think you had better come with us, Mr. Helm. So we can find out exactly what else you failed to tell us. Besides moving Miss Americott."

"You fancy giving me more of this?" Helm backed to the wall and raised his arms, as if strung up by his wrists. His smile was one of triumph rather than sarcasm. That morning, he had returned the pistol to the nail behind one of his paintings as an unlikely place to hide it.

The responsibility of looking after a firearm had weighed heavily on him. Wearing it made him feel rather ridiculous. There had been no question of taking it on a trip to Italy and back, and he had been reluctant to leave it locked in the car in case someone stole the car from the airport parking area.

Ianos Makronotis smiled at him, creating a million wrinkles. "The last time, you were sensible enough to talk before I had to resort to unpleasantness. Put your hands down, Mr. Helm."

Helm lowered his arms in a wide arc. His right hand disappeared behind the painting – and reappeared holding a pistol. He saw one of the bodyguards throw his head back and stare in open-mouthed appreciation of the conjuring trick.

He had enough time to bring his hands together to work the slide. He stepped forward to plant the muzzle firmly against Ianos Makronotis' forehead. The desperation in the old man's eyes was a disturbing sight but he was the cause of the confrontation, Helm reminded himself.

Something clicked in the bedroom.

"Put gun down, Johnny," said Tsai. "Got you covered."

"The impact of a bullet will make me pull the trigger," said Helm, fighting to keep his voice level. "If I don't decide to do it anyway, just for the hell of it."

"No need to die, Johnny."

"The same applies to you, Tsai," Helm said with a lot more confidence than he felt. "Right now, I'm wondering how you're going to explain to your boss how you got his uncle killed. And what he'll do to you. I think this is what you'd call a Mexican stand-off. You can't shoot me without killing everyone in the flat. Including yourself."

2. REALITY INTRUDES

JUST WHEN HELM WAS ON the point of surrendering, Tsai lifted the muzzle of her pistol and lowered the hammer. Her right hand disappeared round to the back of her light, cotton jacket. It returned empty.

"What now, Johnny?"

"One thing you ought to know, chum," Helm told Ianos Makronotis, "I've arranged some insurance. Three letters in the post, addressed to me at friends' homes. If I turn up dead, or I disappear, they'll make interesting reading. The fourth goes to Eva von Arlberg if I don't make regular phone calls and use the right code phrases. You know what that means."

"Your word against Phileros Makronotis?" sneered his uncle.

"Enough solid facts to cause him a lot of embarrassment. Which the von Arlbergs will enjoy giving him."

"So what do you want?"

"I want our passports, mine and Klara Amercott's. And I want to be left alone. I'm still looking for the missing vanload of stuff. If you don't get it back, it'll be because I can't find it, not because I've stolen it. But if you and your pals come round again making threats, I'll string *you* up on a wall first chance I get and see how you bloody well like it. Got that?"

"How much time are you asking Philo for? One day? Two?"

"As much time as it takes to run down my leads. I'm not setting any dead-lines. Now, get out of here before I blow your kneecaps off. And take your pals with you."

Helm backed away from the old man, keeping the gun trained on his head. The bodyguards quickly formed a protective Ianos Makronotis sandwich. Helm watched from the staircase as a big, black Mercedes saloon drove away.

"I go too?" said Tsai uncertainly.

Helm shrugged, then he lowered the hammer of his pistol, trying not to look too relieved. "Suit yourself. You and I are still on the same side,

aren't we? Nous sommes les bons types."

"Quoi?" frowned Tsai.

"We're the good guys."

"D'accord!" laughed Tsai. "Toujours les bon types. Puis-j' téléphoner?"

"Help yourself. Fancy a drink?"

"Merci."

Helm poured two measures of *Metaxas* brandy, emptying the bottle, and put one glass on the telephone table. Tsai had switched from fluent French to basic Greek. Helm let the brandy burn a fiery trail down to his stomach. Loaded guns made him nervous. When he handled one, he was always afraid that he would pull the trigger by mistake and shoot someone – someone who didn't deserve it.

Being honest with himself, however, he had quite enjoyed threatening Ianos Makronotis. He had derived an almost perverted pleasure from watching the old man in fear of losing a few years from a long life. And he refused to feel ashamed. Ianos Makronotis deserved every moment of his terror, and more, for hanging Klara up on a wall.

Tsai finished her call. "Boss say okay to leave you alone if I stay with you. Watch for double cross. Okay?"

"I suppose you'd end up lurking nearby if I say it's not okay," said Helm. "And it means *I* can keep an eye on *you* if you stay here. What made you back down just now?"

"Professional judgement. First time we meet, you not shoot, Today, maybe. But not if no danger. So I take away danger. Take away my gun. Like I say, you not shoot first, Johnny. But you good poker player now. Look like you shoot now. Maybe give old Ianos heart attack."

"You mean, you've got me all worked out?"

"Pretty good. So what leads you got?"

"Oh, no, you don't," laughed Helm. "We might be on the same side but we both know anything I tell you goes straight to the boss. I'm not giving him a chance to squeeze me out. Not just for myself. I'm thinking of Klara."

"I work that out," nodded Tsai.

"I tell you what, I bloody well hope old Ianos does come back. I'd love to hang him up on a wall like one of my paintings."

"Ianos not get old by risking life. Scared of you now. Not go near you again to save kneecaps."

"Funny how these things pop into your mind." Helm dropped onto one of the canvas chairs and drained his glass. "That's what that old sod Morgenstern threatened me with to persuade me to talk. And the guy he gave his orders to looked like he'd really enjoy breaking mine."

"Guy blown up with clinic? And Adolf Hitler?" Tsai settled on the other canvas chair but she looked ready to leap to her feet.

"Right. I can't say I'm sorry he came to a sticky end. I think there's a lot to be said for letting those who live by the gun get blown up."

"Big bang for us too?"

"Not for us good guys. The difference between us and the likes of Avvi is we don't start the trouble. We only pick up our guns when the bad guys try to take violent short cuts. Look at Gladwin. He'd be alive today, and maybe three million dollars richer, if he hadn't tried to sew everything up by killing you and blaming it on me."

"You like him?"

"I shouldn't after the way he kept messing me about, but I have to admit a grudging admiration for someone who could tell me a different set of lies every time the wind changed and look as if he believed them every time. I think I liked his life more than the man himself. Zooming round the world, playing silly buggers with mugs like me."

"So what you do now?"

"Right now?" said Helm. "At eight-fifteen on a Monday night? I'm going to sit and read a book and let my dinner go down. And hope the shock I've just had doesn't give me indigestion. Or have you got two tickets to a show?"

"If you stay here, I go to hotel, pack bag."

"Hoping I don't sneak away while you're gone?" grinned Helm.

"Maybe bring passports," Tsai told him with a winning smile.

"That's an improvement," laughed Helm. "You'll get a hell of a lot more co-operation from bribing me than shoving a gun in my ribs and chaining me to something big and handy."

Tsai was lying in the hammock, reading the previous day's *Le Monde*, when Helm got up on Tuesday morning. They had boiled eggs, toast and coffee for breakfast. Then Helm faced up to the major problem of the day. Tsai had returned the previous evening with the passports and a message of confidence from Phileros Makronotis. Helm had been able to read an ominous 'or else' into it. His problem was that he had no leads and no ideas for places to look for leads.

He did the washing up and tidied the flat, putting off the evil hour. Tsai went back to her newspaper. Helm could tell that she was waiting for him to do something. When he decided to go out for a drive, Tsai settled in the front passenger seat and waited to see where he would take her.

Helm thought about going to Koropi, where he had seen the vanload of treasure last. He headed instead for Piraeus, hoping that a wander round in the sea air would blow inspiration into him. An idea did arrive as he reached the port. He kept going and took the turn-off to the right, towards Athens.

Tsai accompanied him to the main post office. Helm headed for the poste restante section. That was where he had hidden vital documents. It was a good bet for Gladwin's secrets.

"We come here," said Tsai. "Nothing for Gladwin. Or Lane."

"Kirios Bateman?" Helm said to the woman at the counter.

He wrote the name in Latin characters on a scrap of paper and handed it to her. The woman returned with a manilla envelope of the size used to send bills. When she said something in Greek, Helm held his Irish passport up to his face and pointed to the picture to prove that he was the same person. There were people on either side of him, staring impatiently at the woman. She accepted the proof of identity and handed over the letter.

"This is what he called himself in London," Helm said to Tsai when they were away from the scrum at the counter. He found three telephone numbers – one local, one in Piraeus and the number of his flat in Valaki – on a sheet of ruled paper in the envelope. He assumed that the Piraeus number belonged to the garage, where he had collected the Fiat *Uno*, on his arrival in Greece.

A male voice answered when he placed a call to the local number from a bank of public telephones. Tsai had joined him in the square cubicle.

"I'm calling for Mr. Lane, who's also Bateman," said Helm.

"Yeah? Who are you?" The voice had an American accent.

"This is John Scott. Is that Alex?"

"Do I know you?"

"You picked me up in a car once. And again a couple of days later in a helicopter. Remember?"

"Maybe."

"Okay, the thing is, Mr. Lane wants you to deliver the goods you've been holding for him. As soon as possible. And I guess I'm suppose to pay you."

"Where?"

"A flat in Valaki. You've been there before. Pordi Street, number twenty-seven, first floor. I'll expect you in an hour, okay?"

Alex muttered to himself in Greek as he wrote down the address. "And we get paid there?"

"I'm just off to the bank now to get some cash."

"Okay. One hour. See you."

"How come you know this Alex?" said Tsai suspiciously when Helm had replaced the receiver.

"He and his mate threw a dead donkey at us. Remember?"

"Oh, that Alex!"

"And they think you're dead, so you'd better not be in the flat when

they arrive, okay?"

"Watch from café."

"Are you going to apologize to me for suspecting me of a double cross? Are you thoroughly ashamed of yourself?"

"No," grinned Tsai. "Dead easy in end."

"All the hardest problems have dead easy solutions – when you've thought of them," Helm said wisely.

They drove back to Valaki via Elousis Square, where Tsai collected a copy of Tuesday's *Le Monde*, and then the offices of a bonded courier service, which felt able to guarantee same-day delivery of an envelope containing Klara Amercott's passport to Mrs. Angeline Dundee in Rome.

Helm went into the Hotel Renga with Tsai to make sure that she had no opportunity to pass on any messages about his plans. He realized the futility of the gesture when she headed down Pordi Street in Valaki to the café. Tsai could make any number of telephone calls while she was out of sight in the café and he was waiting in his flat.

Alex and Yani turned up after twenty minutes. They gasped their way up the stairs twice. Gladwin had transferred his loot to two large, steel-lined trunks. They were what Helm would call body-trunks – big enough to take a corpse away from the scene of a murder. The delivery men sagged onto a trunk apiece to get their breath back. Alex's black moustache drooped soggly. Yani's designer T-shirt looked as if it could do with wringing out.

Helm gave them cans of chilled *Heineken* from his fridge and let them see that he was wearing a pistol in a shoulder holster under his anorak. He was trying to create an impression of toughness, hoping that the weapon would make them more nervous than him.

"Lane said we get two hundred and fifty thousand drachmas," said Alex, lowering his empty can of lager.

Helm used a pocket calculator. Paying \$1,700 for storing two trunks for three days was pure extortion. "You sure it wasn't twenty-five thousand?"

Yani's guilty expression confirmed that he had hit the mark.

"How about a bonus for getting here quick?" said Alex.

Helm offered him six \$50 bills. "I haven't got too much Greek money. Is this okay for you?"

"I guess so," said Alex. "What's in these?"

"I think he said a couple of computers and printers he got cheap," said Helm. He had spent some time wondering what sort of moderately valuable items a security advisor would want to store. The reply seemed to satisfy Alex and Yani. They headed back to their van, taking fresh cans of lager with them.

Helm watched them drive away, then he returned to the steel trunks.

Scratches around the locks suggested that the custodians had been interested in the contents, but they had failed to discovering that what they had been storing was worth nearly two million dollars.

The door opened behind him. Helm assumed that Tsai had arrived for a look at the trunks. He remained on his knees in front of one of them. The next thing he knew, someone was pushing a gun into his right ear.

Graf Maximillian von Arlberg, wearing a white Panama hat on his grey head, entered the flat when Helm had been relieved of his pistol by one of the count's beefy retainers. Two more followed their master into the studio. One held Tsai's right arm in restraining grip.

"Good morning, Mr. Scott." The count fanned himself with his hat. The temperature in his part of Austria was a warm 20° Centigrade. It was 10° hotter just to the south of Athens.

"Morning, your Lordship," said Helm. "Is this where someone gets hung up on a wall?"

"You seem to lack the facilities," smiled the count. "But no doubt we can devise another method to teach you not to blackmail my daughter. Perhaps the loss of a few fingernails will be instructive."

Graf von Arlberg took a stroll around the flat, visiting each room. Then he stopped in front of the five paintings on the display rails in the studio and examined them closely. "Unsigned. Pity," he remarked to himself. "But the style and the technique stand out nevertheless." Then he seemed to rediscover the prisoners. He pointed to the hammock and issued orders in German.

Helm and Tsai were made to sit sideways on the hammock. A retainer bound Helm's left wrist to Tsai's right with one of the plastic loops used by American cops for immobilizing the hands of drug-dealers during street arrests. Another white plastic strip fastened Tsai's left wrist to the netting of the hammock. They had to sit in an unnatural crouch to remain upright. They felt in constant danger of tipping over backwards.

One of the count's retainers took out a chunky cigarette case and knelt in front of one of the steel trunks. He had a set of lock-picks behind a sliding panel.

"How did they sneak up on you?" Helm asked Tsai to take his mind off how painful it would be to have fingernails ripped off.

"The young lady is rather distinctive," said the count. "How often does one see a Chinese woman sitting in a Greek café reading a French newspaper? And her loyalty to you was most touching, Mr. Scott. She made no fuss when I gave my word not to damage you terminally."

"I appreciate that," said Helm. "I prefer not to be damaged terminally." Nobody else knew that his remark was heavily ironic.

The telephone began to ring as the first trunk surrendered its secrets. Graf von Arlberg shook his head when one of his men made to pick up

the receiver. The count himself lifted the flat lid of the trunk, which was full of polystyrene spaghetti. The count plunged his hands into the lucky dip. Spilling white wriggles onto the well-worn carpet, he drew out a length of grey plastic drainpipe. It contained a rolled painting. The count hummed a happy tune over an uninspiring landscape. Then he held it up for Helm's inspection.

"See what you could have had, Mr. Scott? This painting alone must be worth one hundred thousand dollars."

"I think it's dreadful," said Helm. "I wouldn't give you a fiver for it."

"My God! I think you are serious," laughed the count.

"I know rubbish when I see it," said Helm.

"You have the soul of an art dealer, Mr. Scott. You have no feeling for the aesthetic value of a work. You would not let a desire to collect a work get in the way of making a profit out of it. But I see your taste, displayed on your walls, is more modern."

"Those are what I call pictures with a touch of class," Helm said modestly.

"Someone put note under door," said Tsai.

"The count frowned incomprehension at her.

"She's right," said Helm. "Someone just shoved a note under the door."

One of his men brought the note to the count. He visited each window in turn and saw tall men lounging all around the building, as if waiting for opening time. The count cast a last, longing look at the two trunks, then he moved one of the canvas chairs to command the room and sat down. One of his men opened the door to the staircase in response to an imperious nod.

Craven Kaiser, Tsai's boss, entered the studio first, followed by Dieter Erlich, the local security advisor, and then Phileros Makronotis. Helm sagged with relief; his fingernails were safe; and almost lost his balance on the hammock.

Kaiser checked that the other rooms were empty before he holstered his pistol. Erlich moved the other canvas chair to the vicinity of the trunks. Makronotis sat down. It was rather a tight squeeze but he managed it with dignity. He faced the count like an emperor greeting a visiting prince.

"Your man has been blackmailing my daughter," said Graf von Arlberg. "I came here to stop him."

"Mr. Scott," said Makronotis. "You must refrain from blackmailing people. It is illegal."

"So's threatening people and tying them up," said Helm.

Kaiser used the scissors on his Swiss army knife to cut through the plastic ties to free the prisoners.

"Why were you blackmailing the young lady?" Makronotis said severely.

"Because she got the money from Daddy, who wanted me to blow up his cryostore so he could collect on the insurance but didn't want to pay me anything for risking my neck."

"Defaulting on payment does not inspire loyalty," Makronotis told the count with equal severity. "But perhaps I had better take charge of Mr. Scott's evidence to make sure that he desists. How much did Maximillian agree to pay you, Mr. Scott?"

"We never got past the threats of what he'd do if I didn't help him."

"What would you consider a fair price?"

"Four of the chairs in that room where we had the German champagne."

"Impossible," said the count. "They are part of a set."

"Unmöglich is not a word in my vocabulary," said Helm.

"I would say the fee is extremely reasonable," said Makronotis. "Have them delivered to my agent in London, and I shall arrange delivery to Mr. Scott's home. Will you be staying in Athens for lunch?"

"I have other business here," nodded the count, conceding defeat on the chairs. "Including a working lunch."

"In that case, we need not detain you," said Makronotis.

Graf von Arlberg rose smoothly to his considerable height and delivered a stiff bow with a click of heels. One of his retainers took Helm's pistol from his pocket, holding it by the barrel. He placed it on the unopened trunk, taking care not to point it at Makronotis. Another man did the same with Tsai's pistol. Von Arlberg led his three bodyguards out of the flat.

The Imperial Guard was dispersing, its work of intimidation completed. Four giants remained behind with a large van. Graf von Arlberg's car headed for Athens as part of a convoy with the rest of the Imperial Guardsmen.

Makronotis showed off his treasures to the company as he unwrapped them. Helm pretended to share the general euphoria but his private opinion remained that most of the collection was junk. He did like one or two pieces, however, proving that he wasn't a complete Philistine. There was a briefcase at the bottom of the second trunk. Makronotis counted the bundles of notes. He looked at Tsai when he reached ninety and the briefcase was empty.

Tsai shook her head. "No way Johnny got rest, sir."

Helm realized that Maximillian, Graf von Arlberg, wasn't the only fabulously rich miser around. Makronotis' sceptical frown suggested that he believed that Helm had got his hands on the missing \$100,000. A quick calculation told Helm that the missing cash meant as much to a

billionaire as ten quid mattered to someone with his own bank balance. The comparison put quite a different slant on his gift of a statuette worth \$80,000 to Eva von Arlberg.

"Gladwin must have spent the missing hundred grand buying his million bucks of forgeries," Helm realized suddenly. "That's where it went."

"Obviously," said Erlich.

"Is it?" said Helm sceptically. "Where would he get it at such short notice?"

"Mafia contacts in Palermo," said Erlich in the same patient tone. "It's only an hour away by Learjet."

"Oh!" said Helm, educated even more in the nastier aspects of Gladwin's devious life. A man with Gladwin's lack of scruples obviously had contacts with organized crime.

"You realize your finder's fee depends on the value of goods recovered, not the goods lost?" said Makronotis.

"I can trust a man of honour to give us a fair deal." Helm looked at Tsai.

"As my employee, Miss Yuan-lin is aware that she is not eligible for a finder's fee."

Helm just shrugged. He had learned that stealth, not argument, is often the best way to redress injustice.

The landlady arrived to find out what was happening in her flat. Helm knew that it was pure nosiness rather than genuine concern. She did nothing about the loud parties in the ground-floor flat.

The landlady swung from horror at the sight of white worms all over the floor to confusion when she recognized Phileros Makronotis. Helm wondered if she would curtsy. Makronotis sent her on her way with a smile, a kind word and a contribution from Kaiser to the cleaning costs.

Helm and what was left of his luggage joined the procession back to the Hotel Renga. Tsai escorted him to the conference room for a final debriefing. The common conclusion was that Gladwin had handed his loot over to Alex and Yani in Koropi during his fairly brief absence from the storage shed.

"An assessor is calculating the exact value of the recovered items to determine your finder's fee," said Makronotis when Helm ran out of things to tell him. "We seem to have acquired five unsigned paintings in the style of Mondrian, which are not on my inventory."

"I did those," said Helm. "As part of my cover in Valaki. I was pretending to be an artist."

"Would you consider selling them?"

"You can have them for free if you like them," said Helm, flattered.

Makronotis smiled. "They created some amusing confusion among the

experts. They would be an interesting souvenir. I accept your gift with thanks. One thing more – my foster father mentioned certain letters you have written.”

“I think we agreed blackmail is illegal,” said Helm. “And unnecessary when people deal honourably with each other. Can we also agree Klara Amercott was working with me, and no further action need be taken?”

“A gentleman’s agreement?” Makronotis offered a large hand across the conference table.

Helm had to rise out of his chair slightly to shake it. There was no doubt as to who was the senior partner in the agreement.

“And the documents you were using to blackmail Eva von Arlberg? Where are they?” Makronotis added.

“Eva put some notes on the plan of the cryostore, showing the best places to put bombs to demolish it. In her own writing. But we burned the plan last Friday. It was part of a game we were playing – who could give the other the biggest shock. I reckon I won with that plan. But I was never, ever blackmailing her,” Helm added firmly. “That’s not my style.”

“Then why does her father think you were?”

“Because he’s an old miser and Eva’s got expensive tastes. And I reckon she enjoyed screwing the money out of him. Strictly for her own benefit.”

“I see. I think that covers everything for the moment, Mr. Helm.” Phileros Makronotis nodded a dismissal.

One of the Imperial Guardsmen took Helm to room 322, where a valet had unpacked his possessions. Clearly, he was not yet free to go. When he had changed into his white suit, Tsai whisked him down to the car park to reclaim the Mercedes. They were off for lunch in Corinth.

Roger Gladwin’s fatal boating accident was an accepted part of history. The lack of a body to bury was nothing unusual. Helm had to play the part of an English cousin, who had arrived to settle Gladwin’s affairs. Makronotis was still hoping that some or all of the missing \$100,000 would turn up, along with anything else that Gladwin had salted away.

Tsai had a notebook full of coded entries – places to look for Gladwin’s secrets – when she drove Helm to Athens airport on Wednesday morning. Helm was flying home via Rome and Zürich. He was wearing his white suit, with the jacket draped across his cabin bag and his cashmere pullover standing by for the frigid wastes of Kent in summer.

Helm took a gift box covered in gold foil from his cabin bag while he was waiting for his flight to board. “Open it carefully. Don’t let everyone see what’s in it,” he warned as he handed it Tsai

Tsai's mouth formed an 'O' of surprise when she saw the wad of thousand dollar bills.

"That's your half of the finder's fee for the briefcase," Helm told her. "Let's not pretend you haven't earned it. The other is a prize for the only person who played things absolutely straight with me over the last fortnight."

"It's lovely, Robert." Tsai looked properly impressed by the \$5,000 diamond bracelet in the velvet presentation case.

Helm had been the jeweller's first serious customer of the day. He had enjoyed spending such an enormous sum, in his terms, even more than the jeweller had enjoyed receiving it. Tsai made him promise to let her know the result of his body scan. Helm felt unsettled by that intrusion of real life into his last minutes in Greece.

He ignored the chief steward when she began the usual pre-flight briefing on the airliner. He knew all about oxygen masks, and if the airliner crashed into the Ionian Sea, he had no illusions about surviving to need a life jacket. All that he could think about was whether Klara was still in Rome.

Tsai had kept him in Corinth for the rest of Tuesday – meeting people, searching Gladwin's office and home and reading through his records. There had been no opportunity to use a telephone privately. They had arrived back in Athens by car just after midnight. Helm had been unwilling to call Klara from the Hotel Renga in case one of the security staff listened in. His only other trip out of the hotel on Wednesday morning had been to the jeweller's shop at the southern end of Elousis Square, and Tsai had hovered outside, waiting for him.

There was a chance that Klara had decided to run as soon as the courier delivered her passport. Knowing the scope and power of the Makronotis organization, she might have felt unsafe a mere 700 miles from Athens.

If so, Helm felt that she was welcome to the \$114,000 in the hotel safe. Making lots of money very quickly, if not exactly easily, gave him little sense of real ownership. Being able to write off such a huge amount felt strange, but it had been a strange month.

Helm's flight touched down five minutes early at Leonardo da Vinci airport. Hand luggage only meant no delay, hanging around for the airliner's baggage compartment to be unloaded. An immigration officer asked him how long he would be in Italy. Helm replied, "An hour and twenty minutes," and showed him a ticket for the two o'clock flight to Zürich.

He chose a sad-looking, middle-aged taxi driver in the hope that he might not drive as if he hoped to be spotted by the Ferrari Formula One team boss. His driver had a sound sense of self-preservation. They had

a few near-hits but they reached the Hotel Mestre with no new dents. The driver surprised Helm by choosing to be paid in drachmas rather than dollars or sterling.

Helm experienced an enormous wave of relief when the receptionist told him that Signora Dundee was in their room. He had been putting off contacting Klara in case she had disappeared.

He asked for their bill to be prepared, then he dashed for the lift. Klara looked as if she was seeing a ghost when she opened the door of their suite.

"Close your mouth, Angeline, you'll get it full of mozzies," Helm attempted an Australian accent through his grin.

"I was really worried when I got your note," said Klara.

"Why? I thought it was quite cheerful."

"When you said you got my passport by pulling a gun on old Ianos, I couldn't see any way you'd get out of Greece alive if they caught you. Then I heard about Gladwin's accident on the radio. I've been hanging on every bulletin since then, waiting to hear an Irishman called John Scott had the same sort of accident."

"We came to a gentleman's agreement, your ex-boss and I. No grudges, no blackmail, no reprisals against you. And look at all this Monopoly money I got. Thousand-dollar bills. Two hundred and fifty of them. Doesn't look real, does it?"

"So you found Gladwin's buried treasure?"

"Most of it. I'll tell you all about it on the way to the airport. I was able to get you on the flights I booked. We've got an hour to pack, check out here and get to the airport to check in there."

Helm enjoyed his airport lunch of chicken risotto, and another hour in the air. His enjoyment was a product of the company and relief at being able to go home rich and undamaged. The two-hour stop-over in Zürich gave him time enough to take Klara into the city to open two accounts at a leading bank. He used Phileros Makronotis' carte blanche as his reference, and drank a cup of excellent coffee while the director summoned his own Greek translator to read the note above a familiar signature.

Helm and Klara flew on to London with just \$10,000 apiece for living expenses. Helm had no sense of travelling with a huge sum in his money belt. The ten United States notes were lost in a wad of European money, which was long on zeros and short on real value.

Immigration control at Gatwick separated them briefly. Klara was travelling on her own passport, which made her an alien from the planet America. John Scott, a citizen of the Irish Republic, passed through the gate for members of the European club, hoping that no

suspicious Special Branch agents would take an interest in him. A man travelling on an irregular passport, arriving from Zürich with another passport in another name and a fair sum in assorted currencies, was liable to be arrested as a suspected IRA paymaster.

The taxi driver at the head of the rank didn't want to go to Maidstone. Helm suspected that it was a bargaining tactic to push up the price. He turned his back and asked the next man in line how he fancied the job. Helm's impression of a man who didn't mess about produced instant co-operation. The driver even helped to carry Klara's cases when they reached Helm's home and earned himself an over-generous tip.

It was half past nine on a dark, damp September evening, and they were hungry again. Helm put the central heating on at full blast before they went out in search of food. Klara chose traditional English fish and chips from the variety of takeaways on offer.

Helm bought a bottle of champagne on the way home, which offended the lady on duty in the off-licence. Nobody, she seemed to think, should be allowed to spend £38 on one bottle of wine. She became less indignant when she added Klara's shiny, new wedding ring to Helm's white suit and two foreign tans, and arrived at a couple just back from their honeymoon.

Very little mail had accumulated since his last trip home. Helm realized that he had been away for little more than a long weekend. The chance to win a Ford *Orion* didn't tempt him in the least. His bank statement showed a balance of just over £500. A month earlier, he would have considered himself quite well off. Now, the sum was just the equivalent of the half-million lire in his money belt and quite insignificant.

One of the newspapers had posted on a couple of late offers to his box number in their publication. The first sounded positively criminal but the second was quite interesting. A stuntman working for a film company had been injured in an unrelated car crash. The company was looking for a stand-in willing to sit tight and let them demolish a set around him. The price offered was \$65,000 plus travelling expenses. There was no mention of medical insurance.

Envelope number four contained a note from Dr. Bennett, delivered by hand, asking Helm to make an appointment to hear the results of his body scan and the second set of blood tests. He still had to face the question of whether he was about to be assassinated by his own body.

Given a free choice, his instinct was to take the next flight to the film location in Arizona. He couldn't leave right away, however. He was expecting the London agent of the Makronotis organization to deliver four von Arlberg chairs the next morning. He was sure that a mere millionaire wouldn't dare say no to a billionaire.

Klara's reaction to the note from his doctor was optimism – that he would receive either a clean bill of health or that early treatment would lead to an early cure. Helm knew that he would be in for a good talking-to if he looked like ducking out of a visit to the health centre.

Mutual concern had come out of shared danger. How long it would last remained to be seen. Helm felt that there was a danger that Klara would become bored with him when their life slowed down to a normal place – or a pace normal for pre-terminal Robert Helm – but he knew that his fear could be reflex self-doubt. The time had come for a more positive approach to life now that he could afford a lot of jet-setting.

The risks of the last month had been all about preparing for the worst. He had enough money now for the wildest farewell, or the longest life with prudent investment on top of more pedestrian earnings. The money had created its own intoxication. He could only hope that he and Klara would stay together when they both sobered up.

But whatever happened, he felt sure that he could handle it. Robert Helm, disguised as John Albert Scott and Bruce Dundee, had been to the sharp end of life, where billionaires live and their employees can be attacked with guns and knives at any time.

He had broken enough laws to keep Klara in permanent employment defending him if the police of half of Europe ever stumbled across his trail. Good sense told him that it was time to retire from the active life of a terminal man. But whether his retirement was permanent or temporary depended very much on whether Dr. Bennett had good or bad news for him.

Whatever the next few days had in store for him, Robert Helm knew that the time had come to enjoy spending some of his earnings and to find out just how seriously Mrs. Angeline Dundee took her 25,000 drachma wedding ring.

The End.