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THE SHINY RAINDROP FELL FROM the sky, through the darkness, towards the shivering lights of the port below. Cold gusting north-westerlies drove the raindrop over the dried-up riverbed that divided the town lengthwise and the disused railway line that divided it diagonally. The four quadrants of the town were numbered clockwise; beyond that they had no name. No name the inhabitants remembered anyway. And if you met those same inhabitants a long way from home and asked them where they came from they were likely to maintain they couldn't remember the name of the town either.

The raindrop went from shiny to grey as it penetrated the soot and poison that lay like a constant lid of mist over the town despite the fact that in recent years the factories had closed one after the other. Despite the fact that the unemployed could no longer afford to light their stoves. In spite of the capricious but stormy wind and the incessant rain that some claimed hadn't started to fall until the Second World War had been ended by two atom bombs a quarter of a century ago. In other words, around the time Kenneth was installed as police commissioner. From his office on the top floor of police HQ

Chief Commissioner Kenneth had then misruled the town with an iron fist for twenty-five years, irrespective of who the mayor was and what he was or wasn't doing, or what the powers-that-be were saying or not saying over in Capitol, as the country's second-largest and once most important industrial centre sank into a quagmire of corruption, bankruptcies, crime and chaos. Six months ago Chief Commissioner Kenneth had fallen from a chair in his summer house. Three weeks later, he was dead. The funeral had been paid for by the town – a council decision made long ago that Kenneth himself had incidentally engineered. After a funeral worthy of a dictator the council and mayor had brought in Duncan, a broad-browed bishop's son and the head of Organised Crime in Capitol, as the new chief commissioner. And hope had been kindled amongst the city's inhabitants. It had been a surprising appointment because Duncan didn't come from the old school of politically pragmatic officers, but from the new generation of well educated police administrators who supported reforms, transparency, modernisation and the fight against corruption – which the majority of the town's elected get-rich-quick politicians did not.

And the inhabitants' hope that they now had an upright, honest and visionary chief commissioner who could drag the town up from the quagmire had been nourished by Duncan's replacement of the old guard at the top with his own hand-picked officers. Young, untarnished idealists who *really* wanted the town to become a better place to live.

The wind carried the raindrop over District 4 West and the town's highest point, the radio tower on top of the studio where the lone, morally indignant voice

of Walt Kite expressed the hope, leaving no 'r' unrolled, that they finally had a saviour. While Kenneth had been alive Kite had been the sole person with the courage to openly criticise the chief commissioner and accuse him of some of the crimes he had committed. This evening Kite reported that the town council would do what it could to rescind the powers that Kenneth had forced through making the police commissioner the real authority in town. Paradoxically this would mean that his successor, Duncan the good democrat, would struggle to drive through the reforms he, rightly, wanted. Kite also added that in the imminent mayoral elections it was 'Tourtell, the sitting and therefore fattest mayor in the country, versus no one. Absolutely no one. For who can compete against the turtle, Tourtell, with his shell of folky joviality and unsullied morality, which all criticism bounces off?'

In District 4 East the raindrop passed over the Obelisk, a twenty-storey glass hotel and casino that stood up like an illuminated index finger from the brownish-black four-storey wretchedness that constituted the rest of the town. It was a contradiction to many that the less industry and more unemployment there was, the more popular it had become amongst the inhabitants to gamble away money they didn't have at the town's two casinos.

'The town that stopped giving and started taking,' Kite trilled over the radio waves. 'First of all we abandoned industry, then the railway so that no one could get away. Then we started selling drugs to our citizens, supplying them from where they used to buy train tickets, so that we could rob them at our convenience. I would never have believed I would say I missed the profit-sucking masters of industry, but at least they worked in

respectable trades. Unlike the three other businesses where people can still get rich: casinos, drugs and politics.’

In District 3 the rain-laden wind swept across police HQ, Inverness Casino and streets where the rain had driven most people indoors, although some still hurried around searching or escaping. Across the central station, where trains no longer arrived and departed but which was populated by ghosts and itinerants. The ghosts of those – and their successors – who had once built this town with self-belief, a work ethic, God and their technology. The itinerants at the twenty-four hour dope market for brew; a ticket to heaven and certain hell. In District 2 the wind whistled in the chimneys of the town’s two biggest, though recently closed, factories: Graven and Estex. They had both manufactured a metal alloy, but what it consisted of not even those who had operated the furnaces could say for sure, only that the Koreans had started making the same alloy cheaper. Perhaps it was the town’s climate that made the decay visible or perhaps it was imagination; perhaps it was just the certainty of bankruptcy and ruin that made the silent, dead factories stand there like what Kite called ‘capitalism’s plundered cathedrals in a town of drop-outs and disbelief’.

The rain drifted to the south-east, across streets of smashed street lamps where jackals on the lookout huddled against walls, sheltering from the sky’s endless precipitation while their prey hurried towards light and greater safety. In a recent interview Kite had asked Chief Commissioner Duncan why the risk of being robbed was six times higher here than in Capitol, and Duncan had answered that he was glad to finally get an easy question: it was because the unemployment rate was six

times higher and the number of drug users ten times greater.

At the docks stood graffiti-covered containers and run-down freighters with captains who had met the port's corrupt representatives in deserted spots and given them brown envelopes to ensure quicker entry permits and mooring slots, sums the shipping companies would log in their miscellaneous-expenses accounts swearing they would never undertake work that would lead them to this town again.

One of these ships was the MS *Leningrad*, a Soviet vessel losing so much rust from its hull in the rain it looked as if it was bleeding into the harbour.

The raindrop fell into a cone of light from a lamp on the roof of one two-storey timber building with a store-room, an office and a closed boxing club, continued down between the wall and a rusting hulk and landed on a bull's horn. It followed the horn down to the motorbike helmet it was joined to, ran off the helmet down the back of a leather jacket embroidered with NORSE RIDERS in Gothic letters. And to the seat of a red Indian Chief motorbike and finally into the hub of its slowly revolving rear wheel where, as it was hurled out again, it ceased to be a drop and became part of the polluted water of the town, of everything.

Behind the red motorbike followed eleven others. They passed under one of the lamps on the wall of an unilluminated two-storey port building.

The light from the lamp fell through the window of a shipping office on the first floor, onto a hand resting on a poster: MS *GLAMIS* SEEKS GALLEY HAND. The fingers were long and slim like a concert pianist's and the nails

well manicured. Even though the face was in shadow, preventing you from seeing the intense blue eyes, the resolute chin, the thin, miserly lips and nose shaped like an aggressive beak, the scar shone like a white shooting star, running diagonally from the jaw to the forehead.

'They're here,' Inspector Duff said, hoping his men in the Narcotics Unit couldn't hear the involuntary vibrato in his voice. He had assumed the Norse Riders would send three to four, maximum five, men to get the dope. But he counted twelve motorbikes in the procession slowly emerging from the darkness. The two at the back each had a pillion rider. Fourteen men to his nine. And there was every reason to believe the Norse Riders were armed. Heavily armed. Nevertheless, it wasn't the sight of superior numbers that had produced the tremor in his vocal cords. It was that Duff had achieved his dearest wish. It was that *he* was leading the convoy; finally *he* was within striking distance.

The man hadn't shown himself for months, but only one person owned that helmet and the red Indian Chief motorbike. Rumour had it the bike was one of fifty the New York Police Department had manufactured in total secrecy in 1955. The steel of the curved scabbard attached to its side shone.

Sweno.

Some claimed he was dead, others that he had fled the country, that he had changed his identity, cut off his blond plaits and was sitting on a *terrazza* in Argentina enjoying his old age and pencil-thin cigarillos.

But here he was. The leader of the gang and the cop-killer who, along with his sergeant, had started up the Norse Riders some time after the Second World War. They had picked rootless young men, most of

them from dilapidated factory-worker houses along the sewage-fouled river, and trained them, disciplined them, brainwashed them until they were an army of fearless soldiers Sweno could use for his own purposes. To gain control of the town, to monopolise the growing dope market. And for a while it had looked as if Sweno would succeed, certainly Kenneth and police HQ hadn't stopped him; rather the opposite, Sweno had bought in all the help he needed. It was the competition. Hecate's home-made dope, brew, was much better, cheaper and always readily available on the market. But if the anonymous tip-off Duff had received was right, this consignment was big enough to solve the Norse Riders' supply problems for some time. Duff had hoped, but not quite believed, what he read in the brief type-written lines addressed to him was true. It was simply too much of a gift horse. The sort of gift that – if handled correctly – could send the head of the Narco Unit further up the ladder. Chief Commissioner Duncan still hadn't filled all the important positions at police HQ with his own people. There was, for example, the Gang Unit, where Kenneth's old rogue Inspector Cawdor had managed to hang on to his seat as they still had no concrete evidence of corruption, but that could only be a question of time. And Duff was one of Duncan's men. When there were signs that Duncan might be appointed chief commissioner Duff had rung him in Capitol and clearly, if somewhat pompously, stated that if the council didn't make Duncan the new commissioner, and chose one of Kenneth's henchmen instead, Duff would resign. It was not beyond the bounds of possibility that Duncan had suspected a personal motive behind this unconditional declaration

of loyalty, but so what? Duff had a genuine desire to support Duncan's plan for an honest police force that primarily served the people, he really did. But he also wanted an office at HQ as close to heaven as possible. Who wouldn't? And he wanted to cut off the head of the man out there.

Sweno.

He was the means *and* the end.

Duff looked at his watch. The time tallied with what was in the letter, to the minute. He rested the tips of his fingers on the inside of his wrist. To feel his pulse. He was no longer hoping, he was about to become a believer.

'Are there many of them, Duff?' a voice whispered.

'More than enough for great honour, Seyton. And one of them's so big, when he falls, it'll be heard all over the country.'

Duff cleaned the condensation off the window. Ten nervous, sweaty police officers in a small room. Men who didn't usually get this type of assignment. As head of the Narco Unit it was Duff alone who had taken the decision not to show the letter to other officers; he was using only men from his unit for this raid. The tradition of corruption and leaks was too long for him to risk it. At least that is what he would tell Duncan if asked. But there wouldn't be much cavilling. Not if they could seize the drugs and catch thirteen Norse Riders red-handed.

Thirteen, yes. Not fourteen. One of them would be left lying on the battlefield. If the chance came along.

Duff clenched his teeth.

'You said there'd only be four or five,' said Seyton, who had joined him at the window.

‘Worried, Seyton?’

‘No, but you should be, Duff. You’ve got nine men in this room and I’m the only one with experience of a stake-out.’ He said this without raising his voice. He was a lean, sinewy, bald man. Duff wasn’t sure how long he had been in the police, only that he had been in the force when Kenneth was chief commissioner. Duff had tried to get rid of Seyton. Not because he had anything concrete on him; there was just something about him, something Duff couldn’t put his finger on, that made him feel a strong antipathy.

‘Why didn’t you bring in the SWAT team, Duff?’

‘The fewer involved the better.’

‘The fewer you have to share the honours with. Because unless I’m very much mistaken that’s either the ghost of Sweno or the man himself.’ Seyton nodded towards the Indian Chief motorbike, which had stopped by the gangway of MS *Leningrad*.

‘Did you say Sweno?’ said a nervous voice from the darkness behind them.

‘Yes, and there’s at least a dozen of them,’ Seyton said loudly without taking his eyes off Duff. ‘Minimum.’

‘Oh shit,’ mumbled a second voice.

‘Shouldn’t we ring Macbeth?’ asked a third.

‘Do you hear?’ Seyton said. ‘Even your own men want SWAT to take over.’

‘Shut up!’ Duff hissed. He turned and pointed a finger at the poster on the wall. ‘It says here MS *Glamis* is sailing to Capitol on Friday at 0600 hours and is looking for galley staff. You said you wanted to take part in this assignment, but you hereby have my blessing to apply for employment there instead. The money and the food are supposed to be better. A show of hands?’

Duff peered into the darkness, at the faceless, unmoving figures. Tried to interpret the silence. Already regretting that he had challenged them. What if some of them actually did put up their hands? Usually he avoided putting himself in situations where he was dependent on others, but now he needed every single one of the men in front of him. His wife said he preferred to operate solo because he didn't like people. There could have been something in that, but the truth was probably the reverse. People didn't like him. Not that everyone actively disliked him, although some did; there was something about his personality that put people off. He just didn't know what. He knew his appearance and confidence attracted a certain kind of woman, and he was polite, knowledgeable and more intelligent than most people he knew.

'No one? Really? Good, so let's do what we planned, but with a few minor adjustments. Seyton goes to the right with his three men when we come out and covers the rear half of them. I go to the left with my three men. While you, Sivart, sprint off to the left, out of the light, and run in an arc in the darkness until you're behind the Norse Riders. Position yourself on the gangway so that no one can escape into the boat. All understood?'

Seyton cleared his throat. 'Sivart's the youngest and—' '—fastest,' Duff interrupted. 'I didn't ask for objections, I asked if my instructions were *understood*.' He scanned the blank faces in front of him. 'I'll take that as a yes.' He turned back to the window.

A short bow-legged man with a white captain's hat waddled down the gangway in the pouring rain. Stopped by the man on the red motorbike. The rider hadn't

removed his helmet, he had just flipped up the visor, nor had he switched off his engine. He sat with his legs splayed obscenely astride the saddle and listened to the captain. From under the helmet protruded two blond plaits, which hung down over the Norse Rider logo.

Duff took a deep breath. Checked his gun.

The worst was that Macbeth *had* rung. He had been given the same tip-off via an anonymous phone call and offered Duff the SWAT team. But Duff had turned down his offer, saying all they had to do was pick up a lorry, and had asked Macbeth to keep the tip-off quiet.

At a signal from the man in the Viking helmet one of the other bikers moved forward, and Duff saw the sergeant's stripes on the upper arm of his leather jacket when the rider opened a briefcase in front of the ship's captain. The captain nodded, raised his hand, and a second later iron screamed against iron, and light appeared in the crane swinging over its arm from the quayside.

'We're almost there,' Duff said. His voice was firmer now. 'We'll wait until the dope and the money have changed hands, then we'll go in.'

Silent nods in the semi-darkness. They had gone through the plans in painstaking detail, but they had imagined a maximum of five couriers. Could Sweno have been tipped off about a possible intervention by the police? Was that why they had turned up in such strength? No. If so, they would have called it all off.

'Can you smell it?' Seyton whispered beside him.

'Smell what?'

'Their fear.' Seyton had closed his eyes and his nostrils were quivering. Duff stared into the rainy night. Would he have accepted Macbeth's offer of the SWAT team now?

Duff stroked his face with his long fingers, down the diagonal scar. There was nothing to think about now; he had to do this, he'd always had to do this. Sweno was here now, and Macbeth and SWAT were in their beds asleep.

Macbeth yawned as he lay on his back. He listened to the rain drumming down. Felt stiff and turned onto his side.

A white-haired man lifted up the tarpaulin and crept inside. Sat shivering and cursing in the darkness.

'Wet, Banquo?' Macbeth asked, placing the palms of his hands on the rough roofing felt beneath him.

'It's a bugger for a gout-ridden old man like me to have to live in this piss-hole of a town. I should grab my pension and move into the country. Get myself a little house in Fife or thereabouts, sit on a veranda where the sun shines, bees hum and birds sing.'

'Instead of being on a roof in a container port in the middle of the night? You've got to be joking?'

They chuckled.

Banquo switched on a penlight. 'This is what I wanted to show you.'

Macbeth held the light and shone it on the drawing Banquo passed him.

'There's your Gatling gun. Beautiful job, isn't she?'

'It's not the appearance that's the problem, Banquo.'

'Show it to Duncan then. Explain that SWAT needs it. Now.'

Macbeth sighed. 'He doesn't want it.'

'Tell him we'll lose as long as Hecate and the Norse Riders have heavier weaponry than us. Explain to him what a Gatling can do. Explain what *two* can do!'

‘Duncan won’t agree to any escalation of arms, Banquo. And I think he’s right. Since he’s been the commissioner there *have* been fewer shooting incidents.’

‘This town is still being depopulated by crime.’

‘It’s a start. Duncan has a plan. And he wants to do what’s right.’

‘Yes, yes, I don’t disagree. Duncan’s a good man.’ Banquo groaned. ‘Naive though. And with this weapon we could clear up and—’

They were interrupted by a tap on the tarpaulin. ‘They’ve started unloading, sir.’ Slight lisp. It was SWAT’s young new sharpshooter, Olafson. Along with the other equally young officer Angus, there were only four of them present, but Macbeth knew that all twenty-five SWAT officers would have said yes to sitting here and freezing with them without a moment’s hesitation.

Macbeth switched off the light, handed it back to Banquo and slid the drawing inside his black SWAT leather jacket. Then he pulled away the tarpaulin and wriggled on his stomach to the edge of the roof.

Banquo crawled up beside him.

In front of them in the floodlights, over the deck of MS *Leningrad*, hovered a prehistoric-looking military-green lorry.

‘A ZIS-5,’ Banquo whispered.

‘From the war?’

‘Yep. The S stands for Stalin. What do you reckon?’

‘I reckon the Norse Riders have more men than Duff counted on. Sweno’s obviously worried.’

‘Do you think he suspects the police have been tipped off?’

‘He wouldn’t have come if he did. He’s afraid of Hecate. He knows Hecate has bigger ears and eyes than us.’

‘So what do we do?’

‘We wait and watch. Duff might be able to pull this off on his own. In which case, we don’t go in.’

‘Do you mean to say you’ve dragged these kids out here in the middle of the night to sit and *watch*?’

Macbeth chortled. ‘It was voluntary, and I did say it might be boring.’

Banquo shook his head. ‘You’ve got too much free time, Macbeth. You should get yourself a family.’

Macbeth raised his hands. His smile lit up the beard on his broad dark face. ‘You and the boys are my family, Banquo. What else do I need?’

Olafson and Angus chuckled happily behind them.

‘When’s the boy going to grow up?’ Banquo mumbled in desperation and wiped water off the sights of his Remington 700 rifle.

Bonus had the town at his feet. The glass pane in front of him went from floor to ceiling, and without the low cloud cover he would have had a view of absolutely the whole town. He held out his champagne glass, and one of the two young boys in riding jodhpurs and white gloves rushed over and recharged it. He should drink less, he knew that. The champagne was expensive, but it wasn’t him paying. The doctor had said a man of his age should begin to think about his lifestyle. But it was so good. Yes, it was as simple as that. It was so good. Just like oysters and crawfish tails. The soft, deep chair. And the young boys. Not that he had access to them. On the other hand, he hadn’t asked.

He had been picked up from reception at the Obelisk and taken to the penthouse suite on the top floor with a view of the harbour on one side and the central station,

Workers' Square and Inverness Casino on the other. Bonus had been received by the great man with the soft cheeks, the friendly smile, the dark wavy hair and the cold eyes. The man who was called Hecate. Or the Invisible Hand. Invisible, as very few people had ever seen him. The Hand, as most people in the town over the last ten years had been affected in some way or other by his activities. That is, his product. A synthetic drug he manufactured himself called brew. Which, according to Bonus' rough estimate, had made Hecate one of the town's four richest men.

Hecate turned away from the telescope on the stand by the window. 'It's difficult to see clearly in this rain,' he said, pulling at the braces of his own jodhpurs, and took a pipe from the tweed jacket hanging over the back of the chair. If he'd known that they would turn out dressed as an English hunting party he would have chosen something other than a boring everyday suit, Bonus thought.

'But the crane's working, so that means they're unloading. Are they feeding you properly, Bonus?'

'Excellent food,' Bonus said, sipping his champagne. 'But I have to confess I'm a little unsure what it is we're celebrating. And why I'm entitled to be here.'

Hecate laughed and raised his walking stick, pointing to the window. 'We're celebrating the view, my dear flounder. As a seabed fish you've only seen the belly of the world.'

Bonus smiled. It would never have occurred to him to object to the way Hecate addressed him. The great man had too much power to do good things for him. And less good.

'The world is more beautiful from up here,' Hecate continued. 'Not more real but more beautiful. And then

we're celebrating this, of course.' The stick pointed to the harbour.

'And this is?'

'The biggest single stash ever smuggled in, dear Bonus. Four and a half tons of pure amphetamine. Sweno has invested everything the club owns plus a little more. What you see below is a man who has put all his eggs in one basket.'

'Why would he do that?'

'Because he's desperate, of course. He can see that the Riders' mediocre Turkish product is outclassed by my brew. But with such a large quantity of quality speed from the Soviets, bulk discount and reduced transport costs will make it competitive in price and quality per kilo.' Hecate rested the stick on the thick wall-to-wall carpet and caressed its gilt handle. 'Well calculated by Sweno, and if he succeeds it's enough to upset the balance of power in this town. So here's to our worthy competitor.'

He raised his glass, and Bonus obediently followed suit. But as Hecate was about to put it to his lips he studied the glass with a raised eyebrow, pointed to something and handed the glass back to one of the boys, who immediately cleaned it with his glove.

'Unfortunately for Sweno,' Hecate continued, 'it's difficult to obtain such a large order from a completely new source without someone in the same line of business catching wind of it. And unfortunately it seems this "someone" may have passed on to the police an anonymous, though reliable, tip-off about where and when.'

'Such as you?'

Hecate smirked. Took the glass, turned his broad bottom towards Bonus and leaned down to the telescope. 'They're lowering the lorry now.'

Bonus got up and went over to the window. ‘Tell me, why didn’t you launch an attack on Sweno instead of watching from the sidelines? You would have got rid of your sole competitor and acquired four and a half tons of quality amphetamine at a stroke. And you could have sold it on the street for how many millions?’

Hecate sipped from his glass without raising his eye from the telescope. ‘Krug,’ he said. ‘They say it’s the best champagne. So it’s the only one I drink. But who knows? If I’d been served something else I might have acquired a taste for it and switched brands.’

‘You don’t want the market to try anything else but your brew?’

‘My religion is capitalism and the free market my creed. But it’s everyone’s right to follow their nature and fight for a monopoly and world domination. And society’s duty to oppose us. We’re just playing our roles, Bonus.’

‘Amen to that.’

‘Shh! Now they’re handing over the money.’ Hecate rubbed his hands. ‘Showtime . . .’

Duff stood by the front door with his fingers around the handle listening to his breathing while trying to get eye contact with his men. They were standing in a line on the narrow staircase right behind him. Busy with their thoughts. Releasing the safety catch. A last word of advice to the man next to them. A last prayer.

‘The suitcase has been handed over,’ Seyton called down from the first floor.

‘Now!’ Duff shouted, wrenching open the door and hugging the wall.

The men pushed past him into the darkness. Duff followed. Felt the rain on his head. Saw figures moving.

Saw a couple of motorbikes left unmanned. Raised the megaphone to his mouth.

‘Police! Stay where you are with your hands in the air! I repeat, this is the police. Stay where—’

The first shot smashed the glass in the door behind him, the second caught the inside leg of his trousers. Then came a sound like when his kids made popcorn on a Saturday night. Automatic weapons. Fuck.

‘Fire!’ Duff screamed, throwing down the megaphone. He dived onto his stomach, tried to raise his gun in front of him and realised he had landed in a puddle.

‘Don’t,’ whispered a voice beside him. Duff looked up. It was Seyton. He stood stationary with his rifle hanging down by his side. Was he sabotaging the action? Was he . . . ?

‘They’ve got Sivart,’ Seyton whispered.

Duff blinked filthy water from his eyes and kept looking, a Norse Rider in his sights. But the man was sitting calmly on his motorbike with his gun pointed at them, not shooting. What the hell was going on?

‘Nobody move a fuckin’ finger now and this’ll be fine.’

The deep voice came from outside the circle of light and needed no megaphone. Duff saw first the abandoned Indian Chief. Then saw the two figures in the darkness merge into one. The horns sticking up from the helmet of the taller of the two. The figure he held in front of him was a head shorter. With every prospect of being another head shorter. The blade of the sabre glinted as Sweno held it to young Sivart’s throat.

‘What will happen now—’ Sweno’s bass voice rumbled from out of the visor opening ‘—is that we’ll take our stuff with us and go. Nice and quietly. Two of my men

will stay and make sure none of you does anything stupid. Like trying to come after us. Got that?’

Duff hunched up and was about to stand.

‘If I were you I’d stay in the puddle, Duff,’ Seyton whispered. ‘You’ve screwed this up enough as it is.’

Duff took a deep breath. Let it out. Drew another. Shit, shit, shit.

‘Well?’ said Banquo, training the binoculars on the protagonists on the quayside.

‘Looks like we’ll have to activate the young ones after all,’ Macbeth said. ‘But not quite yet. We’ll let Sweno and his men leave the scene first.’

‘What? We’re going to let them get away with the lorry and all the stash?’

‘I didn’t say that, dear Banquo. But if we start anything now we’ll have a bloodbath down there. Angus?’

‘Sir?’ came the quick response from the lad with the deep blue eyes and the long blond hair unlikely to have been allowed by any other team leader but Macbeth. His emotions were written over all his open face. Angus and Olafson had the training, now they just needed some more experience. Angus especially needed to toughen up. During his job interview Angus had explained that he had dropped out of training to become a priest when he saw there was no god; people could only save themselves and one another, so he wanted to become a policeman instead. That had been good enough for Macbeth; he liked the fearless attitude, the boy dealing with the consequences of his beliefs. But Angus also needed to learn how to master his feelings and realise that in SWAT they became practical men of action, the long, and rough, arm of the law. Others could take care of reflection.

‘Go down the back, fetch the car and be ready by the door.’

‘Right,’ Angus said, got up and was gone.

‘Olafson?’

‘Yes?’

Macbeth glanced at him. The constant slack jaw, the lisping, the semi-closed eyes and his grades at police college meant that when Olafson had come to Macbeth, begging to be moved to SWAT, he had had his doubts. But the lad had *wanted* the move, and Macbeth decided to give him a chance, as he himself had been given a chance. Macbeth needed a sharpshooter, and even if Olafson was not spectacularly talented in theoretical subjects, he was a highly gifted marksman.

‘At the last shooting test you beat the twenty-year-old record held by him over there.’ Macbeth nodded to Banquo. ‘Congratulations, that’s a damn fine achievement. You know what it means right here and now?’

‘Er . . . no, sir.’

‘Good, because it means absolutely nothing. What you have to do here is watch and listen to Inspector Banquo and learn. You won’t save the day today. That’s for later. Understand?’

Olafson’s slack jaw and lower lip were working but were clearly unable to produce a sound, so he just nodded.

Macbeth laid a hand on the young man’s shoulder. ‘Bit nervous?’

‘Bit, sir.’

‘That’s normal. Try to relax. And one more thing, Olafson.’

‘Yes?’

‘Don’t mess up.’

‘What’s happening?’ Bonus asked.

‘I know what’s going to happen,’ Hecate said, straightening his back and swinging his telescope away from the quay. ‘So I don’t need this.’ He sat down beside Bonus. Bonus had noticed that he often did that. Sat down beside you instead of opposite. As though he didn’t like you looking straight at him.

‘They’ve got Sweno and the amphetamine?’

‘On the contrary. Sweno’s seized one of Duff’s men.’

‘What? Aren’t you worried?’

‘I never bet on one horse, Bonus. And I’m more worried about the bigger picture. What do you think of Chief Commissioner Duncan?’

‘His promise that you’ll be arrested?’

‘That doesn’t concern me at all, but he’s removed many of my former associates in the police and that’s already created problems in the markets. Come on, you’re a good judge of character. You’ve seen him, heard him. Is he as incorruptible as they say?’

Bonus shrugged. ‘Everyone has a price.’

‘You’re right there, but the price is not always money. Not everyone is as simple as you.’

Bonus ignored the insult by not perceiving it as such. ‘To know how Duncan can be bribed you have to know what he wants.’

‘Duncan wants to serve the herd,’ Hecate said. ‘Earn the town’s love. Have a statue erected he didn’t order himself.’

‘Tricky. It’s easier to bribe greedy vermin like us than pillars of society like Duncan.’

‘You’re right as far as bribery is concerned,’ Hecate said. ‘And wrong with respect to pillars of society and vermin.’

‘Oh?’

‘The foundation of capitalism, dear Bonus. The individual’s attempt to get rich enriches the herd. It’s mechanics pure and simple and happens without us seeing or thinking about it. You and I are pillars of society, not deluded idealists like Duncan.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘The moral philosopher Adam Hand thought so.’

‘Producing and selling drugs serves society?’

‘Anyone who supplies a demand helps to build society. People like Duncan who want to regulate and limit are unnatural and in the long run harmful to us all. So how can Duncan, for the good of the town, be rendered harmless? What’s his weakness? What can we use? Sex, dope, family secrets?’

‘Thank you for your confidence, Hecate, but I really don’t know.’

‘That’s a shame,’ said Hecate, gently tapping his stick on the carpet as he observed one of the boys remove the wire from the cork of a new bottle of champagne. ‘You see, I’ve begun to suspect Duncan has only one weak point.’

‘And that is?’

‘The length of his life.’

Bonus recoiled in his chair. ‘I really hope you haven’t invited me here to ask me to . . .’

‘Not at all, my dear flounder. You’ll be allowed to lie still in the mud.’

Bonus heaved a sigh of relief as he watched the boy struggle with the cork.

‘But,’ Hecate said, ‘you have the gifts of ruthlessness, disloyalty and influence that give you power over the people I need to have power over. I hope I can rely on

you when help is needed. I hope you can be my invisible hand.'

There was a loud bang.

'There we are!' Bonus laughed, patting the boy on the back as he tried to get as much of the unrestrained champagne into the glasses.

Duff lay still on the tarmac. Beside him his men stood equally still watching the Norse Riders, less than ten metres away, preparing to leave. Sivart and Sweno stood in the darkness outside the cone of light, but Duff could see the young officer's body shaking and Sweno's sabre blade, which rested against Sivart's throat. Duff could see that the least pressure or movement would pierce the skin, the artery and drain the man's blood in seconds. And Duff could feel his own panic when he considered the consequences. Not only the consequences of having one of his men's blood on his hands and record, but the consequences of his privately orchestrated actions failing miserably just as the chief commissioner was about to appoint a head of Organised Crime. Sweno nodded to one of the Norse Riders, who dismounted from his motorbike, stood behind Sivart and pointed a gun at his head. Sweno pulled down his visor, stepped into the light, spoke to the man with the sergeant's stripes on his leather jacket, straddled his bike, saluted with two fingers to his helmet and rode off down the quayside. Duff had to control himself not to loose off a shot at him. The sergeant gave some orders and a second later the motorbikes growled off into the night. Only two unmanned motorbikes were left after the others had followed Sweno and the sergeant.

Duff told himself not to give way to panic, told himself to think. Breathe, think. Four men in Norse

Rider regalia were left on the quay. One stood behind Sivart in the shadows. One stood in the light keeping the police covered with an assault rifle, an AK-47. Two men, presumably the pillion riders, got into the lorry. Duff heard the continuous strained whine as the ignition key was turned and for a second he hoped that the old iron monster wouldn't start. Cursed as the first low growl rose to a loud rumbling rattle. The lorry moved off.

'We'll give them ten minutes,' shouted the man with the AK-47. 'Think of something pleasant in the meantime.'

Duff stared at the lorry's rear lights slowly fading into the darkness. Something pleasant? A mere four and a half tons of drugs heading away from him, along with what would have been the biggest mass arrest this side of the war. It didn't help that they *knew* Sweno and his people had been there right in front of them if they couldn't tell the judge and jury they had *seen* their faces and not just fourteen sodding helmets. Something *pleasant*? Duff closed his eyes.

Sweno.

He'd had him here in the palm of his hand. Shit, shit, shit!

Duff listened. Listened for something, *anything*. But all that could be heard was the meaningless whisper of the rain.

'Banquo's got the guy holding the lad in his sights,' Macbeth said. 'Have you got the other one, Olafson?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You have to shoot at the same time, OK. Fire on the count of three. Banquo?'

‘I need more light on the target. Or younger eyes. I might hit the boy as it is.’

‘My target has lots of light,’ Olafson whispered. ‘We can swap.’

‘If we miss and our lad is killed, we’d prefer it if it was Banquo who missed. Banquo, what’s the maximum speed of a fully loaded Stalin lorry, do you reckon?’

‘Hm. Sixty maybe.’

‘Good, but time’s getting short to achieve all our objectives. So we’d better do a bit of improvising.’

‘Are you going to try your daggers?’ Banquo asked Macbeth.

‘From this distance? Thanks for your confidence. No, you’ll soon see, old man. As in *see*.’

Banquo looked up from his binoculars and discovered that Macbeth had stood up and grabbed the pole on to which the light on the roof was bolted. The veins in Macbeth’s powerful neck stood out and his teeth shone in either a grimace or a grin, Banquo couldn’t decide which. The pole was screwed down to withstand the feisty north-westerlies that blew for eight of the year’s twelve months, but Banquo had seen Macbeth lift cars out of snowdrifts before now.

‘Three,’ Macbeth groaned.

The first screws popped out of their sockets.

‘Two.’

The pole came loose and with a jerk tore the cable away from the wall below.

‘One.’

Macbeth pointed the light at the gangway.

‘Now.’

It sounded like two whiplashes. Duff opened his eyes in time to see the man with the automatic weapon topple

forward and hit the ground helmet first. Where Sivart stood there was now light, and Duff could see him clearly and also the man behind him. He was no longer holding a gun to Sivart's head but resting his chin on Sivart's shoulder. And in the light Duff also saw the hole in the visor. Then, like a jellyfish, he slid down Sivart's back to the ground.

Duff turned.

'Up here, Duff!'

He shaded his eyes. A peal of laughter rang out behind the dazzling light and the shadow of a gigantic man fell over the quay.

But the laughter was enough.

It was Macbeth. Of course it was Macbeth.

2

A SEAGULL SWEEP IN OVER Fife through the silence and moonlight under a cloud-free night sky. Below, the river shone like silver. On the west of the river – like an immense fortress wall – a steep black mountain rose to the sky. Just short of the top a monastic order had once erected a large cross, but as it had been put up on the Fife side the silhouette appeared to be upside down to the residents of the town. From the side of the mountain – like a drawbridge over the fortress moat – jutted an impressive iron bridge. Three hundred and sixty metres long and ninety metres high at its tallest point. Kenneth Bridge, or the new bridge as most people called it. The old bridge was by comparison a modest but more aesthetically pleasing construction further down the river, and it meant a detour. In the middle of the new bridge towered an unlovely marble monument in the shape of a man, meant to represent former Chief Commissioner Kenneth, erected at his own orders. The statue stood inside the town boundary by a centimetre as no other county would give the rogue's posthumous reputation a centimetre of land for free. Even though the sculptor had complied with Kenneth's order to emphasise his visionary status by

creating a characteristic horizon-searching pose, not even the most benevolent of artists could have refrained from drawing attention to the chief commissioner's unusually voluminous neck and chin area.

The seagull flapped its wings to gain height, hoping for better fishing on the coast across the mountain, even though that meant crossing the weather divide. From good to bad. For those wishing to travel the same way there was a two-kilometre-long narrow black hole from the new bridge through the mountain. A mountain and a partition many appeared to appreciate – neighbouring counties referred to the tunnel as a rectum with an anal orifice at each end. And indeed as the seagull passed over the mountain peak it was like flying from a world of quiet harmony into a freezing-cold filthy shower falling onto the foul-smelling town beneath. And as if to show its contempt the seagull shat, then continued to swerve between the gusts of wind.

The seagull shit hit the roof of a shelter, below which an emaciated trembling boy crept onto a bench. Although the sign beside the shelter indicated it was a bus stop the boy wasn't sure. So many bus routes had been stopped over the last couple of years. Because of the decreasing population, the mayor said, the fathead. But the boy had to get to the central station for brew; the speed he had bought from some bikers was just crap, icing sugar and potato flour rather than amphetamine.

The oily wet tarmac glinted beneath the few street lamps that still worked, and the rain lay in puddles on the potholed road leading out of town. It had been quiet, not a car to be seen, only rain. But now he heard a sound like a low gurgle.

He raised his head. Pulled on the string of his eyepatch, which had slipped over from his empty eye cavity and now covered the remaining eye. Perhaps he could hitch a lift to the centre?

But no, the sound came from the wrong direction.

He drew up his knees again.

The gurgle rose to a roar. He couldn't be bothered to move, besides he was already drenched, so he just covered his head with his arms. The lorry passed, sending a cascade of filthy water into the bus shelter.

He lay there thinking about life until he realised it was wiser not to.

The sound of another vehicle. This time?

He struggled upright and looked out. But no, it was coming from the town too. Also at great speed. He stared into the lights as they approached. And the thought came into his head: one step into the road and all his problems were solved.

The van passed him without going into any of the potholes. Black Ford Transit. Cops, three of them. Great. You don't want a lift with them.

'There it is, ahead of us,' Banquo said. 'Step on it, Angus!'

'How do you know it's them?' Olafson asked, leaning forward between the front seats of the SWAT Transit.

'Diesel smoke,' Banquo said. 'My God, no wonder there's an oil crisis in Russia. Get right behind them so that they can see us in their rear-view mirror, Angus.'

Angus maintained his speed until they reached the black exhaust. Banquo rolled down his window and steadied his rifle on the wing mirror. Coughed. 'And now alongside, Angus!'

Angus pulled out and accelerated. The Transit drew alongside the snorting, groaning lorry.

A puff of smoke came from the lorry window. The mirror under Banquo's rifle barrel broke with a crack.

'Yes, they've seen us,' Banquo said. 'Get behind them again.'

The rain stopped suddenly and everything around them became even darker. They had driven into the tunnel. The tarmac and the hewn black walls seemed to swallow the lights of the headlamps; all they could see was the lorry's rear lights.

'What shall we do?' Angus asked. 'The bridge at the other end, and if they pass the middle . . .'

'I know,' Banquo said, lifting his rifle. The town stopped by the statue, their area of jurisdiction stopped, the chase stopped. In theory of course they could carry on, it had happened before: enthusiastic officers, rarely in the Narco Unit though, had arrested smugglers on the wrong side of the boundary. And every time they'd had a nice fat juicy case thrown out of court and had to face censure for gross misjudgement in the course of duty. Banquo's Remington 700 recoiled.

'Bull's eye,' he said.

The lorry began to swerve in the tunnel; bits of rubber flew off the rear wheel.

'Now you'll feel what a heavy steering wheel is *really* like,' Banquo said and took aim at the other rear tyre. 'Bit more distance, Angus, in case they go straight into the tunnel wall.'

'Banquo!' came a voice from the back seat.

'Olafson?' Banquo said, slowly pressing the trigger.

'Car coming.'

'Whoops.'

Banquo lifted his cheek off the rifle as Angus braked.

In front of them the ZIS-5 veered from side to side, alternately showing and cutting off the headlights of the oncoming car. Banquo heard the horn, the desperate hooting of a saloon car that saw a lorry bearing down on it and knew it was too late to do anything.

‘Jesus . . .’ Olafson said in a lisped whisper.

The sound of the horn rose in volume and frequency.

Then a flash of light.

Banquo automatically glanced to the side.

Caught a glimpse of the back seat in the car, the cheek of a sleeping child, resting against the window.

Then it was gone, and the dying tone of the horn sounded like the disappointed groan of cheated spectators.

‘Faster,’ Banquo said. ‘We’ll be on the bridge in no time.’

Angus jammed his foot down, and they were back in the cloud of exhaust.

‘Steady,’ Banquo said while aiming. ‘Steady . . .’

At that moment the tarpaulin on the back of the lorry was pulled aside, and the Transit’s headlamps lit up a flatbed piled with plastic bags containing a white substance. The window at the back of the driver’s cab had been smashed. And from the top of a gap between the kilo bags pointed a rifle.

‘Angus . . .’

A brief explosion. Banquo caught sight of a muzzle flash, then the windscreen whitened and fell in on them.

‘Angus!’

Angus had taken the point and swung the wheel sharply to the right. And then to the left. The tyres

screamed and the bullets whined as the fire-spitting muzzle tried to track their manoeuvres.

'Jesus Christ!' Banquo shrieked and fired at the other tyre, but the bullet just drew sparks from the wing.

And suddenly the rain was back. They were on the bridge.

'Get him with the shotgun, Olafson,' Banquo yelled. 'Now!'

The rain pelted through the hole where the windscreen had been, and Banquo moved so that Olafson could lay the double-barrelled gun on the back of his seat. The barrel protruded above Banquo's shoulder, but disappeared again at the sound of a thud like a hammer on meat. Banquo turned to where Olafson sat slumped with his head tipped forward and a hole in his jacket at chest height. Grey upholstery filling fluffed up when the next bullet went right through Banquo's seat and into the seat beside Olafson. The guy on the lorry had got his eye in now. Banquo took the shotgun from Olafson's hands and in one swift movement swung it forward and fired. There was a white explosion on the back of the lorry. Banquo let go of the shotgun and raised his rifle. It was impossible for the guy on the lorry to see through the thick white cloud of powder, but from the darkness rose the floodlit white marble statue of Kenneth, like an unwelcome apparition. Banquo aimed at the rear wheel and pulled the trigger. Bull's eye.

The lorry careered from side to side, one front wheel mounted the pavement, a rear wheel hit the kerb, and the side of the ZIS-5 struck the steel-reinforced fence. The scream of metal forced along metal drowned the vehicles' engines. But, incredibly, the driver in front managed to get the heavy lorry back on the road.

‘Don’t cross the bloody boundary, please!’ Banquo yelled.

The last remnant of rubber had been stripped from the lorry’s rear wheel rims and a fountain of sparks stood out against the night sky. The ZIS-5 went into a skid, the driver tried desperately to counter it, but this time he had no chance. The lorry veered across the road and skidded along the tarmac. It was practically at the boundary when the wheels gained purchase again and steered the lorry off the road. Twelve tons of Soviet military engineering hit Chief Commissioner Kenneth right under the belt, tore him off the plinth and dragged the statue plus ten metres or so of steel fencing along before tipping over the edge. Angus had managed to stop the Transit, and in the sudden silence Banquo observed Kenneth falling through the moonlight and slowly rotating around his own chin. Behind him came the ZIS-5, bonnet first, with a tail of white powder like some damned amphetamine comet.

‘My God . . .’ the policeman whispered.

It felt like an eternity before everything hit the water and coloured it white for an instant, and the sound reached Banquo with a slight time delay.

Then the silence returned.

Sean stamped his feet on the ground outside the club house, staring out through the gate. Scratched the *NORSE RIDERS TILL I DIE* tattoo on his forehead. He hadn’t been so nervous since he was in the hospital delivery room. Wasn’t it just typical that he and Colin had drawn the short straw and had to stand guard on the night when excitement was at fever pitch? They hadn’t been allowed to string along and collect the dope or go to the party either.

‘Missus wants to call the kid after me,’ said Sean, mostly to himself.

‘Congrats,’ said Colin in a monotone, pulling at his walrus moustache. The rain ran down his shiny pate.

‘Ta,’ said Sean. Actually he hadn’t wanted either. A tattoo that would stamp him for life or a kid he knew would do the same. Freedom. That was the idea of a motorbike, wasn’t it? But the club and then Betty had changed his notion of freedom. You can only truly be free when you belong, when you feel real solidarity.

‘There they are,’ Sean said. ‘Looks like everything’s gone well, eh?’

‘Two guys missing,’ Colin said, spitting out his cigarette and opening the high gate with barbed wire on top.

The first bike stopped by them. The bass rumbled from behind the horn helmet. ‘We were ambushed by the cops, so the twins will come a bit later.’

‘Right, boss,’ Colin said.

The bikes roared through the gate one after the other. One of the guys gave a thumbs up. Good, the dope was safe, the club saved. Sean breathed out with relief. The bikes rolled across the yard past the shed-like single-storey timber house with the Norse Rider logo painted on the wall and disappeared into the big garage. The table was laid in the shed; Sweno had decided that the deal should be celebrated with a piss-up. And after a few minutes Sean heard the music turned up inside and the first shouts of celebration.

‘We’re rich.’ Sean laughed. ‘Do you know where they’re taking the dope?’

Colin said nothing, just rolled his eyes.

He didn't know. Nobody did. Only Sweno. And those in the lorry, of course. It was best like that.

'Here come the twins,' Sean said, opening the gate again.

The motorbikes came slowly, almost hesitantly, up the hill towards them.

'Hi, João, what happ—?' Sean began, but the bikes continued through the gate.

He watched them as they stopped in the middle of the yard as though considering leaving their bikes there. Then they nudged one another, nodded to the open garage door and drove in.

'Did you see João's visor?' Sean said. 'It had a hole in it.'

Colin sighed heavily.

'I'm not kidding!' Sean said. 'Right in the middle. I'll go and see what really happened down on the quay.'

'Hey, Sean . . .'

But Sean was off, ran across the yard and entered the garage. The twins had dismounted. Both stood with their backs to him, still wearing their helmets. One twin by the door leading straight from the garage into the club's function room held the door ajar, as though not wanting to show himself but seeing what the party was like first. João, Sean's best mate, stood by his bike. He had removed the magazine from his ugly-looking AK-47 and seemed to be counting how many bullets he had left. Sean patted him on the back. That must have been quite a shock because he spun round with a vengeance.

'What happened to your visor, João? Stone chip, was it?'

João didn't answer, just appeared to be busy inserting the magazine back into his AK-47. He was strangely

clumsy. The other strange thing was that he seemed . . . taller. As though it wasn't João standing there, but . . .

'Fuck!' Sean shouted, took a step back and reached for his belt. He had realised what the hole in the visor was and that he wasn't going to see his best pal again. Sean pulled out his gun, released the safety catch and was about to point it at the man still struggling with the AK-47 when something struck him in the shoulder. He automatically swung the gun in the direction from which the blow had come. But there was no one there. Only the guy in the Norse Rider jacket standing over by the door. At that moment his hand seemed to wither and Sean dropped his gun to the floor.

'Not a peep,' a voice said behind him.

Sean turned again.

The AK was pointing at him, and in the reflection of the holed visor he saw a dagger sticking out of his shoulder.

Duff put the barrel of the AK to the tattoo on the guy's forehead. Looked into his gawping, ugly features. His finger squeezed the trigger, just a fraction . . . He heard the hiss of his own breathing inside the helmet and his heart pounding beneath the somewhat too tight leather jacket.

'Duff,' Macbeth said from the club-room doorway. 'Easy now.'

Duff squeezed the trigger a fraction more.

'Stop that,' Macbeth said. 'It's our turn to use a hostage.'

Duff let go of the trigger.

The man's face was as white as a sheet. From fear or loss of blood. Both probably. His voice shook. 'We don't save—'

Duff hit him across the tattoo with the gun barrel. Leaving a stripe that for a moment shone white like a copy of Duff's own trademark. Then it filled with blood.

'You shut up, son, and everything'll be fine,' said Macbeth, who had joined them. He grabbed the young man's long hair, pulled his head back and put the blade of his second dagger to his throat. Pushed him forward to the club-room door. 'Ready?'

'Remember Sweno's mine,' Duff said, making sure the curved magazine sat properly in the weapon, and strode after Macbeth and the Norse Rider.

Macbeth kicked open the door and went in with the hostage in front and Duff hard on his heels. Grinning and loud-mouthed, the Norse Riders were sitting at a long table in the large, open but already smoke-filled club-room. All of them with their backs to the wall facing the three doors that led from the room. Probably a club rule. Duff estimated there were twenty of them. The music was on loud. The Stones. 'Jumpin' Jack Flash'.

'Police!' Duff shouted. 'No one move or my colleague will cut the throat of this fine young man.'

Time seemed to come to an abrupt halt, and Duff saw the man at the end of the table raise his head as if in slow motion. A ruddy porcine face with visible nostrils and plaits so tight they pulled the eyes into two narrow hate-filled straight lines. From the corner of his mouth hung a long thin cigarillo. Sweno.

'We don't save hostages,' he said.

The young man lost consciousness and fell.

In the next two seconds everything in the room froze and all you could hear was the Rolling Stones.

Until Sweno took a drag of his cigarillo. 'Take them,' he said.

Duff registered at least three of the Norse Riders react at the same time and pulled the trigger of his AK-47. Held it there. Spraying chunks of lead with a diameter of 7.62 millimetres, which smashed bottles, raked the table, lashed the wall, carved flesh and stopped Mick Jagger between two *gasses*. Beside him Macbeth had reached for the two Glocks he had removed from the Norse Rider bodies on the quay. Along with their jackets, helmets and bikes. In Duff's hands, his gun felt warm and soft like a woman. Darkness fell gradually as lamps were shot to pieces. And when Duff finally let go of the trigger, dust and feathers hovered in the air, and one lamp swung to and fro from the ceiling sending shadows scurrying up the walls like fleeing ghosts.

3

'I LOOKED AROUND, AND IN the semi-darkness Norse Rider guys were strewn across the floor face down,' Macbeth said. 'Blood, broken glass and empty shell cases.'

'Jesus!' Angus shouted with a slur over the lively babble at the Bricklayers Arms, the SWAT's local behind the central station. The glazed blue eyes looked at Macbeth with what seemed to be adoration. 'You just swept them off the face of the earth! Holy Jesus! Cheers!'

'Now, now, careful with your language, you priest-in-waiting,' Macbeth said, but when many of the eighteen SWAT officers in attendance raised their beer mugs to him, he eventually smiled, shaking his head, and then raised his glass too. Took a long draught and looked at Olafson, who was holding a heavy Bricklayers Arms pint mug in his left hand.

'Does it hurt, Olafson?'

'It's all the better for knowing that one of them has a sore shoulder as well,' Olafson lisped and shyly straightened the sling when the others burst into loud laughter.

'The ones who actually got things rolling were Banquo and Olafson here,' Macbeth said. 'I was just holding the

light like some bloody photographer's assistant for these two artists.'

'Keep going,' Angus said. 'You and Duff had all the Norse Riders on the floor. What happened then?' He flicked his blond hair behind his ears.

Macbeth gazed at the expectant faces around the table and exchanged glances with Banquo before continuing. 'Some of them screamed they were surrendering. The dust settled and the music system was shot to pieces, so it was finally quiet but still dark, and the situation was rather unclear. Duff and I started checking them out from our end of the room. There were no fatalities, but a number of them required medical attention, you might say. Duff shouted that he couldn't find Sweno.' Macbeth ran a finger through the condensation on the outside of his glass. 'I spotted a door behind the end of the table where Sweno had been sitting. At that moment we heard motorbikes starting up. So we left the others and charged out into the yard. And there we saw three motorbikes on their way out of the gate, one of them was red, Sweno's. And the guard, a bald guy with a moustache, jumped on his bike and followed. Duff was furious, wanted to give chase, but I said there were a few badly injured guys inside . . .'

'Did you think that would stop Duff?' a voice whispered. 'Bastards lying around bleeding when he could catch Sweno?'

Macbeth turned. The voice in question was sitting alone in the next booth, his face hidden in the shadow beneath the dart club's trophy cupboard.

'Did you think Duff would consider a few ordinary people's lives when a heroic exploit was within reach?'

A beer mug was raised in the shadows. 'After all there are careers to consider.'

Macbeth's table had gone quiet.

Banquo coughed. 'To hell with careers. We in SWAT don't let defenceless people just die, Seyton. We don't know what you in Narco do.'

Seyton leaned forward and the light fell on his face. 'None of us in Narco quite know what we're doing either, that's the problem with a boss like Duff. But don't let me interrupt your story, Macbeth. Did you go back in and tend their wounds?'

'Sweno's a murderer who would kill again if he had the chance,' Macbeth said without letting go of Seyton's eyes. 'And Duff was worried they would escape across the bridge.'

'I was afraid they'd get across the bridge, as the lorry had tried to do,' Duff said. 'So we jumped back on our bikes. We rode them as hard as we could. Plus a bit more. One miscalculated bend on the wet tarmac . . .' Duff pushed the golden half-eaten crème brûlée across Lyon's damask cloth, took the bottle of champagne from the cooler and refilled the other three's glasses. 'After the first hairpin bend at the bottom of the valley I saw the rear lights of four bikes and pressed on. In my mirror I saw Macbeth was still following.'

Duff cast a furtive glance at Chief Commissioner Duncan to see if his account was being well received. His gentle, friendly smile was hard to interpret. Duncan still hadn't directly commented on the night's stake-out, but wasn't the fact that he had come to this little celebration an acknowledgement in itself? Perhaps, but the chief commissioner's silence unsettled Duff. He felt

more secure with the pale redhead leader of the Anti-Corruption Unit, Inspector Lennox, who with his customary enthusiasm leaned across the table swallowing every word. And the head of the Forensic Unit, Caithness, whose big green eyes told him she believed every scrap and crumb.

Duff put down the bottle. ‘On the stretch leading to the tunnel we were side by side and the lights ahead were growing. As though they had slowed down. I could see the horns on Sweno’s helmet. Then something unexpected happened.’

Duncan moved his champagne next to his red wine glass, which Duff didn’t know whether to interpret as tension or just impatience. ‘Two of the bikes turned off straight after the bus shelter, by the exit road to Forres, while the other two continued towards the tunnel. We were seconds away from the junction and I had to make a decision . . .’

Duff emphasised the word *decision*. Of course he could have said *make a choice*. But *choosing* was just something any idiot might be forced to do while *making a decision* is pro-active, it requires a mental process and character, it is taken by a leader. The kind of leader the chief commissioner needed when he appointed the head of the newly established Organised Crime Unit. The OCU was a grand merging of the Narco Unit and the Gang Unit, and a logical fusion as all the drug dealing in town was now split between Hecate and the Norse Riders, who had swallowed the other gangs. The question was who would lead the unit, Duff or Cawdor, the experienced leader of the Gang Unit, who had a suspiciously large fully paid-off house on the west side of town. The problem was that Cawdor had a supporting cast on

the town council and among Kenneth's old conspirators at police HQ, and even though everyone knew Duncan was prepared to stick his neck out to get rid of the various Cawdors he also had to show some political nous so as not to lose control at HQ. What was clear was that one of Cawdor or Duff would emerge as the winner and the other would be left without a unit.

'I signalled to Macbeth that we should follow the Forres pair.'

'Really?' said Lennox. 'Then the other two would cross the county boundary.'

'Yes, and that was the dilemma. Sweno's a sly fox. Was he sending two men to Forres as decoys while he drove to the boundary as he's the only Norse Rider we've got anything on? Or was he counting on us thinking that was what he was thinking and he would therefore do the opposite?'

'Have we?' Lennox asked.

'Have we what?' Duff asked, trying to conceal his irritation at being interrupted.

'Got anything on Sweno? The Stoke Massacre is time-barred, as far as I know.'

'The two post office robberies in District 1 five years ago,' Duff said impatiently. 'We've got Sweno's fingerprints and everything.'

'And the other Norse Riders?'

'Zilch. And we didn't get anything tonight either because they were all wearing helmets. Anyway, when we turned off for Forres we saw the helmet—'

'What's the Stoke Massacre?' Caithness asked.

Duff groaned.

'You probably weren't born then,' Duncan said in a friendly voice. 'It happened in Capitol straight after the

war. Sweno's brother was about to be arrested for desertion and was stupid enough to draw a weapon. The two arresting policemen, who had both spent the war in the trenches, shot holes in him. Sweno avenged his brother several months later in Stoke. He went into the local police station and shot down four officers, among them one very pregnant woman. Sweno disappeared off our radar, and when he reappeared the case was time-barred. Please, Duff, continue.'

'Thank you. I thought they weren't aware we were so close on their tails that we could see Sweno's helmet when he turned off for Forres and the old bridge. We caught them up only a couple of kilometres or so later. That is, Macbeth fired two shots in the air when they were still a good way in front, and they stopped. So we stopped too. We had left the valley behind us, so it wasn't raining. Good visibility, moonlight, fifty to sixty metres between us. I had my AK-47 and ordered them to get off their bikes, walk five steps towards us and kneel down on the tarmac with their hands behind their heads. They did as we said, we got off our bikes and walked towards them.'

Duff closed his eyes.

He could see them now.

They were kneeling.

Duff's leather gear creaked as he walked towards them, and a drop of water hung in his peripheral vision from the edge of his open visor. Soon it would fall. Soon.

'There was probably a distance of ten to fifteen strides between us when Sweno pulled out a gun,' Macbeth said. 'Duff reacted at once. He fired. Hitting Sweno three times in the chest. He was dead before his helmet hit the ground.'

But in the meantime the second man had drawn his gun and aimed at Duff. Fortunately though he never managed to pull the trigger.'

'Holy shit!' Angus shouted. 'You shot him, did you?' Macbeth leaned back. 'I got him with a dagger.'

Banquo studied his superior officer.

'Impressive,' whispered Seyton from the shadows. 'On the other hand, Duff reacted quicker than you when Sweno went for his gun? I'd have bet you'd be quicker, Macbeth.'

'But there you're wrong,' Macbeth said. *What was Seyton doing, what was he after?* 'Just like Duff,' Macbeth said, lifting his beer mug to his mouth.

'I made a mistake,' Duff said, signalling to the head waiter for another bottle of champagne. 'Not about shooting, of course. But choosing which bikes to follow.'

The head waiter came to the table and quietly informed them that unfortunately they would have to close, and it was illegal to sell alcohol after midnight. Unless the chief commissioner . . .

'Thank you, but no,' said Duncan, who was a master of the art of smiling roguishly while raising his eyebrows in reproof. 'We'll keep to the law.'

The waiter took his leave.

'Making the wrong choice can happen to the best of us,' Duncan said. 'When did you realise? When you removed his helmet?'

Duff shook his head. 'Immediately before, when I knelt down beside the body and happened to glance at his bike. It wasn't Sweno's bike, the sabre wasn't there. And the Riders don't swap bikes.'

'But they swap helmets?'

Duff shrugged. 'I should have known. After all, Macbeth and I had just employed the same trick ourselves. Sweno swapped his helmet, and they slowed down enough for us to see his helmet was on one of the Riders going to Forres. He himself went through the tunnel, over the bridge and escaped.'

'Smart thinking, no doubt about it,' Duncan said. 'Shame his people weren't as smart.'

'What do you mean?' Duff asked, looking down at the leather folder with the bill the waiter had placed before him.

'Why pull guns on the police when they know – as you yourself said – we have no evidence against anyone except Sweno? They could have just allowed themselves to be arrested and left the police station as free men a few hours later.'

Duff shrugged. 'Perhaps they didn't believe we were policemen. Perhaps they thought we were Hecate's men and we were going to kill them.'

'Or as the chief commissioner says,' Lennox said, 'they're stupid.'

Duncan scratched his chin. 'How many Norse Riders did we lock up?'

'Six,' Duff said. 'When we returned to the club house it was mainly the seriously injured who were still there.'

'I didn't think gangs like the Norse Riders left their injured for the enemy.'

'They knew they would get medical aid faster. They're being treated now, but we're expecting to get more in custody tomorrow. And then they'll be questioned about Sweno. However much pain they're in. We'll find him, sir.'

‘Fine. Four and a half tons of amphetamine. That’s a lot,’ said Duncan.

‘It is indeed.’ Duff smiled.

‘So much that you almost have to ask yourself why you didn’t inform me about the stake-out beforehand.’

‘Time,’ Duff replied quickly. He had weighed up the pros and cons of how to answer the inevitable question. ‘There wasn’t enough time between receiving the tip-off and going into action. As head of the unit I had to assess procedural regulations against the risk of not preventing four and a half tons of amphetamines from reaching the youths in this town.’

Duff met Duncan’s eyes, which were contemplating him. The chief commissioner’s index finger stroked the point of his chin to and fro. Then he moistened his lips.

‘There’s a lot of blood too. A lot of damage to the bridge. The fish in the river are probably already junkies. And Sweno’s still on the loose.’

Duff cursed inwardly. The hypocritical, arrogant fool must be capable of seeing the bigger picture.

‘But,’ said the chief commissioner, ‘six Norse Riders are in custody. And even if we do feel a little more invigorated than usual when eating fish over the next few weeks, better that than the dope ending up in our young people. Or—’ Duncan grabbed his champagne glass ‘—in Seized Goods.’

Lennox and Caithness laughed. It was well known that the HQ warehouse was still unaccountably losing goods.

‘So,’ Duncan said, raising his glass, ‘good police work, Duff.’

Duff blinked twice. His heart beat quickly and lightly. ‘Thank you,’ he said, draining his glass.

Duncan snatched the leather folder. 'This is on me.' He took the bill, held it at arm's length and squinted. 'Although I can't see if I've been given the right bill.'

'Who has!' Lennox said with a stiff smile when no one laughed.

'Let me,' Caithness said, taking the bill and putting on her horn-rimmed granny glasses, which Duff knew she didn't need but wore because she thought they added a couple of years to her age and detracted from her appearance. Duncan had been brave to give Caithness the Forensic Unit. Not because anyone doubted her professional competence – she had been the best cadet at her police college and had also studied chemistry and physics – but she was younger than any of the other unit heads, single and simply too good-looking for suspicion of ulterior motives not to creep in. The candle flames made the water in her laughing eyes behind the glasses, the moisture of her full red lips and the wetness of her shining white teeth sparkle. Duff closed his eyes. The gleaming shine of the tarmac, the sound of tyres on the wet road. The spattering sound. The blood that had splashed to the floor when the man had pulled the dagger from his neck. It was like a hand squeezing Duff's chest, and he opened his eyes with a gasp.

'Everything OK?' Lennox held a carafe of water over Duff's glass, and the dregs splashed in. 'Drink, Duff, so that you can dilute the champagne. You have to drive now.'

'No question of that,' Duncan said. 'I don't want my heroes arrested for drunk driving or killed on the road. My driver wouldn't object to a little detour.'

'Thank you,' Duff said. 'But Fife's—'

‘—more or less on my way home,’ Duncan said. ‘And it’s Mrs Duff and your two wonderful children who should thank me.’

‘Excuse me,’ Duff said, pushing his chair back and standing up.

‘A stupendous police officer,’ Lennox said as he watched Duff stagger towards the toilet door at the back of the room.

‘Duff?’ Duncan queried.

‘Him too, but I was thinking about Macbeth. His results are impressive, his men love him, and even though he worked under Kenneth, we in the Anti-Corruption Unit know he’s rock solid. It’s a pity he doesn’t have the formal qualifications necessary for a higher management post.’

‘There’s no requirement to have anything higher than police college. Look at Kenneth.’

‘Yes, but Macbeth still isn’t one of us.’

‘Us?’

‘Well,’ Lennox lifted his champagne glass with a wry smile, ‘you’ve chosen heads who – whether we like it or not – are seen as belonging to the elite. We all come from the western side of town or Capitol, have an education or a respectable family name. Macbeth is seen more as someone from the broader ranks of the populace, if you know what I mean.’

‘I do. Listen, I’m a bit worried about Duff’s unsteadiness on his feet. Could you . . . ?’

Fortunately the toilet was empty.

Duff did up his flies, stood by one of the sinks, turned on a tap and splashed water over his face. He heard the door go behind him.

‘Duncan asked me to check how you were,’ Lennox said.

‘Mm. What do you think he thought?’

‘Thought about what?’

Duff grabbed a paper and dried his face. ‘About . . . how things went.’

‘He probably thinks what we all think: you did a good job.’

Duff nodded.

Lennox chuckled. ‘You really do want the Organised Crime job, don’t you.’

Duff turned off the tap and soaped his hands while looking at the head of Anti-Corruption in the mirror.

‘You mean I’m a climber?’

‘Nothing wrong with climbing the ladder.’ Lennox smirked. ‘It’s just amusing to see how you position yourself.’

‘I’m qualified, Lennox. So isn’t it simply my duty to this town and my and your children’s future to do what I can for Organised Crime? Or should I leave the biggest unit to Cawdor? A person we both know must have both dirty and bloody hands to have survived under Kenneth for as long as he did.’

‘Aha,’ Lennox said. ‘It’s duty that drives you? Not personal ambition at all. Well, St Duff, let me hold the door open for you.’ Lennox performed a deep bow. ‘I presume you will refuse the salary increase and other concomitant privileges.’

‘The salary, honour and fame are irrelevant to me,’ Duff said. ‘But society rewards those who contribute. Showing contempt for the salary would be like showing contempt for society.’ He studied his face in the mirror. *How can you see when a person is lying?* Is it possible

when the person in question has succeeded in convincing himself that what he says is the truth? How long would it take him to convince himself that it was the truth, the version he and Macbeth had arranged to give of how they had killed the two men on the road?

‘Have you finished washing your hands now, Duff? I think Duncan wants to go home.’

The SWAT men took their leave of each other outside the Bricklayers Arms. ‘Loyalty, fraternity,’ Macbeth said in a loud voice.

The others answered him in slurred, to varying degrees, unison: ‘Baptised in fire, united in blood.’

Then they walked away in every direction of the compass. Macbeth and Banquo to the west, past a street musician who was howling rather than singing ‘Meet Me On The Corner’ and through the deserted run-down concourses and corridors of the central station. A strangely warm wind picked up through the passages and swept litter between the once beautiful Doric pillars crumbling after years of pollution and lack of maintenance.

‘Now,’ Banquo said. ‘Are you going to tell me what *really* happened?’

‘You tell me about the lorry and Kenneth,’ Macbeth said. ‘Ninety-metre free fall!’ His laughter resounded beneath the brick ceiling.

Banquo smiled. ‘Come on, Macbeth. What happened out there on the country road?’

‘Did they say anything about how long they would have to close the bridge for repairs?’

‘You might be able to lie to them, but not to me.’

‘We got them, Banquo. Do you need to know any more?’

‘Do I?’ Banquo waved away the stench from the stairs down to the toilets, where a woman of indeterminate age was standing bent over with her hair hanging down in front of her face as she clung to the handrail.

‘No.’

‘All right,’ Banquo said.

Macbeth stopped and crouched down by a young boy sitting by the wall with a begging cup in front of him. The boy raised his head. He had a black patch over one eye and the other stared out from a doped-up state, a dream. Macbeth put a banknote in his cup and a hand on his shoulder. ‘How’s it going?’ he asked softly.

‘Macbeth,’ the boy said. ‘As you can see.’

‘You can do it,’ Macbeth said. ‘Always remember that. You can stop.’

The boy’s voice slurred and slid from vowel to vowel. ‘And how do you know that?’

‘Believe me, it’s been done before.’ Macbeth stood up, and the boy called a tremulous ‘God bless you, Macbeth’ after them.

They went into the concourse in the eastern part of the station, where there was a conspicuous silence, like in a church. The druggies who weren’t sitting, lying or standing by the walls or on the benches were staggering around in a kind of slow dance, like astronauts in an alien atmosphere, a different gravitational field. Some stared suspiciously at the two police officers, but most just ignored them. As though they had X-ray eyes that had long-ago established that these two had nothing to sell. Most were so emaciated and ravaged it was hard to know exactly how long they had been alive. Or how long they had left.

‘You’re never tempted to start again?’ Banquo asked.

‘No.’

‘Most ex-junkies dream of a last shot.’

‘Not me. Let’s get out of here.’

They walked to the steps in front of the west exit, stopped before they came to where the roof no longer sheltered them from the rain. Beside them, on black rails on a low plinth, stood what appeared in the darkness to be a prehistoric monster. Bertha, a hundred and ten years old, the first locomotive in the country, the very symbol of the optimism about the future that had once held sway. The broad, majestic, gently graded steps led down to the dark, deserted Workers’ Square, where once there had been hustle and bustle, market stalls and travellers hurrying to and fro, but which was now ghostly, a square where the wind whistled and whined. At one end lights glittered in a venerable brick building which had at one time housed the offices of the National Railway Network but had fallen into disuse after the railway was abandoned, until it had been bought and renovated to become the most glamorous and elegant building the town had to offer: Inverness Casino. Banquo had been inside only once and immediately knew it was not his kind of place. Or, to be more precise, he wasn’t their kind of customer. He was probably the Obelisk type, where customers were not so well dressed, the drinks were not so expensive and the prostitutes not so beautiful nor so discreet.

‘Goodnight, Banquo.’

‘Goodnight, Macbeth. Sleep well.’

Banquo saw a light shiver go through his friend’s body, then Macbeth’s white teeth shone in the darkness. ‘Say hello to Fleance from me and tell him his father has done a great job tonight. What I wouldn’t have given to see Kenneth in free fall from his own bridge . . .’