



THE RETURN of THE KING

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a story of *The Prisoner*

by Jeff Somers

CHAPTER ONE: Contact

Today, a beautiful day. New York City almost seemed livable in the bright sunlight that streamed in through the bedroom window, casting odd shadows here and there and warming the sheets. A cat, black as spades and quiet as the night itself, slinked into the room and took possession of a pool of light, basking in the new warmth, squinting its eyes around in contentment. For a few moments peace reigned and quiet stirred the drapes, but as the old man stirred in his bed, the cat sat up, eyes wide, sniffing in his direction. A low mew rumbled out of it, and it licked its chops daintily.

The old man was tall and unbent even by age. His brown hair was mixed liberally with gray, and his face was a mass of lines and crinkles, making him seem even older than he really was. His eyes, however, pale blue and hard, shined with a youth and an energy that belied his age. His eyes grabbed onto everything they saw and held it, interrogating until they chose to move on. Slowly, he sat up in his bed, looking around his apartment as if he couldn't believe he'd remained there through the night.

After a moment he cursed, lightly, under his breath and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. It was always the same, it had always been the same. He'd thought a move to America, under a new name and with a new past, would take away the dreams, would make him feel at home anywhere again. It hadn't. He still felt the need to move to a new place every few months, he still trusted each new place less and less every day. He still dreamt of smiling men with umbrellas, he still screamed in his sleep, raving about dry bones and

numbers.

The cat slinked around his ankles, purring. Absently, he reached down to scratch it. After a moment, he stood and reached for his bathrobe, just as he always had, even in The Village.

The kitchen was sparse and clean, and his pantry seemed to hold more cat food than human food. As he puttered, grunting crankily at the cat (named, in a fit of insane humor, Number One), there came a knock at his door. For a moment, he stopped, and stood still in the middle of the kitchen. His eyes were pinpricks of bright in the dim mask of his face, and they registered fear for a moment - unreasoning, unwanted, and quickly extinguished. He never had visitors. He hadn't even heard a knock in months.

Tightening his robe around him, he walked slowly towards his front door. He tried to peer out at whoever was waiting, but the dim figure standing without gave away no secrets, and after a moment he opened the door savagely, staring out at the average-looking man who grinned at him, bathed in spring.

"What do you want?" he snapped at his visitor.

"Not very polite, Mr. Drake." the younger man replied, his grin turning knowing. He raised an eyebrow as Drake stared at him, partly amazed and partly enraged. "Well," he said after a moment, "are you going to invite me in for some tea, or shall I ring again later?"

Confused, Drake stepped aside.

"I guess I...have no choice." he said, smiling back sardonically.

"Just so, Mr. Drake."

Shutting the door behind them, Drake turned to his new guest and motioned him into the kitchen. "So, ah, how exactly do you know that name, eh?" he asked.

In the kitchen, the man sat down at the table and smiled.

"Perhaps you would prefer.....number six?"

For a moment, it seemed that Drake would just stare at his visitor, and then, without warning, he leapt up and grabbed him by the lapels, pulling him out of the chair and staring at him. "How do you know of that?!?" he demanded. "How!?"

"Relax, old boy. Relax. Let me down and I'll try to explain."

Slowly, Drake set him down and pulled back, wiping his brow with a shaking hand. "Ah, yes. So sorry. Please, go on." his face lit up with mischievous malice. "Number....?"

The man's pleasant grin faded a little. "I don't have a number, Drake." he said.

"Ah." Drake said, inspecting his tea kettle. "We all have numbers, sir. It's just that some of us learn them sooner than others."

The man swallowed back some retort and planted his grin back on his face. "My name is Howes, and I know an awful lot about you, Drake. You might say I have an unfair advantage. I know that in 1967, after a brilliant career at home and abroad in which you had contact with some very sensitive material regarding the security of the western hemisphere, you retired, offering a thin reason and no cooperation. I know that the British Government, in a fit of rash panic, sequestered you in a holding installation code-named The Village. I know that when you refused to discuss your resignation in even casual terms, they grew convinced that you had intended to sell out or defect or leak information and became determined to break you, snap you like a dry twig.....and I know that in 1969 the place was destroyed, blown up.....and every prisoner and warder within accounted for." Howes paused to smile. "Except you."

Drake put tea on, puttering about. "How interesting." he squawked.

Howes nodded. "Very. Of course, the damage to The Village wasn't complete or entire; much of the place was still serviceable, once the central dome was repaired -that took two years, let me assure you. No, the real damage was within our department. It's taken almost twenty years to get the approval to put The Village back into operation, after that disaster. But it is going back into operation, Drake."

"Even after the re-organization of the world powers?" Drake said with a grin. "How paranoid. To think, there are still agents that need to be broken. How medieval!" he poured tea. "Sugar?"

"No thank you." Howes continued, taking a cup from Drake. "Yes, there is still a need, Drake."

"And what is this, eh?" Drake demanded. "A warning? Am I going back? Or are you here to get me, and this is just your creative way of doing it? Will I have to drag that black spot on the face of the earth down brick by brick again!?" he pounded his tea-cup onto the counter. "I will not be pushed, Mr. Howes. I will not be imprisoned again." He leaned forward, eyes shining. "You wanted to break me? How's this -I will kill rather than go back there. I will murder."

Howes blinked, and swallowed, all pretense of a smile drained off his face. Slowly, he stood. "You misunderstand, old chap. You don't get it." he swallowed again, wiping his brow with a handkerchief. "The Colonel has been replaced. A younger man. Mrs. Butterfield died earlier in the years. We have a new director. New blood, Drake, a new administration."

Slowly, Howes walked past Drake towards the front door.

"We don't want you in The Village, Drake." Howes said, a ghost of his smile coming back. "We want you to run it." he opened the front door himself, and paused to look back. "Be seeing you."

The door closed. Drake stared at the chair where Howes had been for a moment, and then picked up his tea again. Number One slinked away, looking this way and that, nervous.

"And you." Drake finally said.

CHAPTER TWO: The Deuce

"Sssshhh," Drake cautioned Number One, "stop it or I'll bring you back to the hotel, eh?"

The cat, trapped within its cage, quieted as if it understood, but still mewed plaintively, not liking the confinement. Drake smiled as he walked the streets of London, carrying the cat-box in one hand. "I know how you feel, little one. But I promise that I will release you. Just a bit more, and we shall be where we wish to."

He wore dark glasses, and wondered how dangerous it had been to return to London, even after so many years. Obviously they still knew of him. Obviously, they had known for a while where he was and what he'd been up to. Still, they hadn't accosted him or killed him or even bothered him....until now. And now he needed answers.....and, oddly (even ironically), advice. And there was, even more ironically, only one person whose advice he thought he might trust.

The old streets were dimmer than he recalled, more clogged with garbage and slush, the air thicker and the people older. It was London, it was even the London he knew. But it had changed. It had aged, and not always gracefully.

"And so, I suppose, have I." he thought.

Clucking comfortingly to the imprisoned cat, he paused in front of a pub called THE QUEEN'S PAWN. For a moment he stood, staring, and other pedestrians moved around him, staring in turn. Then he glanced down and entered, looking around just before he did.

The inside was dim, and smoky, even though there weren't

too many paying customers that early in the afternoon. The barkeep watched him with more than the usual interest, wiping down the bar and studying Drake as the old man walked up, sat down, and placed Number One on the stool next to him.

"And what can I do for you today, sir?"

Drake smiled, looking around. "Whiskey."

The barkeep nodded and moved off, returning with a shot glass. Drake picked it up and sampled it, and then finished the drink. Then he fixed the barkeep with his cool stare. "Nice weather we're having."

"I suppose, sir." The barkeep squinted at him. "Can I help you with anything, sir?"

Drake smiled. "I, ah, I need to see The Deuce."

The barkeep's mild manner drained away. He stared at Drake from either side of a nose that had been broken several times, and his eyes were far too cold to be those of a friendly barkeep. "Eh, sir? I'm not sure I know what you're talking about."

Drake nodded, his smile in place but without any humor. It was predatory and sarcastic. "I'm sure you don't. I need to see your boss. I'm not the police, and I'm not here to arrest anyone. I need to see The Deuce." his smile quirked. "Tell him that Number Six is here, and needs a word."

The barkeep raised an eyebrow. Finally, he nodded. "Wait here." he said, and moved off, pulling a phone from beneath the bar.

While the barkeep talked, Drake's eyes wandered over the bar's dim interior. There were only a few other patrons, and they all seemed to stare back at him with none of the usual shyness of strangers. Drake frowned and looked away, studying Number One through the bars of his cage for a moment, before looking up to see

that the barkeep had returned.

"The Deuce says you should wait here." he said, and pulled off his apron. Hopping over the bar, he gestured to the other customers, and the group of them exited out the front door, locking it behind them.

Drake stood, frowning furiously, and wandered about the place, waiting. Plaintively, Number One meowed. Finally, Drake stopped and turned suddenly, to see a changed but familiar figure standing behind the bar. He was shorter than Drake and was round, his potbelly pronounced and jolly. His beard was shaggier and grayer than Drake recalled, but with his white turtleneck shirt and black bowler hat, he was instantly recognizable.

"My good man!" he boomed. "It's been too long!"

Drake's smile was thin. "Twenty years. When I dropped you off in London that day, I had no intention of ever seeing you again." he looked around again. "I see a life of crime fits you well....Number Two."

"Please, no numbers. Words, but no numbers." The Deuce replied. "And what else could I do? I had to go underground, just as you did. We all need to make a living.....my former position gave me certain managerial abilities well suited to other, less legal organizations." He smiled. "You, though, you have disappeared. Several times I tried to pin you down, and each time I failed. What have you been up to?"

Drake sat down before The Deuce and steeped his hands, his face a mask of pleasant chatter. "Oh, shifting. Names and places. But always names and always different places. Where I wanted and who I wanted."

"Commendable, Num -"

Drake held up a hand.

"- ah, Drake. Commendable." He frowned. "But to what do I owe this visit? Surely not nostalgia for the man who tried so to break you? Even one such as I, who has changed his ways. I believe in freedom, now."

Drake nodded. "Oh, I am sure you do. But, you see, I have a problem. You see, they have.....tracked me down again."

The Deuce leaned forward. "They? You mean.....Control?"

Drake nodded. "Control."

The Deuce nodded. "I thought they might. So, then, The Village has finally been re-funded?"

"Apparently so. But you see, they didn't try to kidnap me, or even threaten me."

"How odd."

"Indeed. You see, they offered me a job."

The Deuce looked at Drake oddly, cocking his head. "That shouldn't surprise you, my good man. That was always the primary objective in your case file. Recruitment." he smiled. "We just took a rough tact, really."

Drake nodded. "That's just it, my old friend. That's just it. They didn't try to make me, this time....they asked me."

The Deuce nodded. "I know."

Drake stopped and looked up. "What? How?"

The Deuce shrugged, tossing something onto the bar. It was faded and bent, but it was still a white circle of plastic, on which had been embossed a black pennyfarthing bicycle and the number 2. Drake picked it up and stared at it in horror.

"You see," the Deuce went on, "they already asked me."

CHAPTER THREE: Two-Faced

Drake stared at The Deuce. "What?"

The Deuce grinned, laughing. "My good man, you didn't know? They didn't tell you? They're recruiting. Making up for the mistakes of the past, as they like to term it. They lost a lot of good people because of the harshness of The Village. Even some of the warders were offended by the place, and that made them think.....treacherous thoughts." his round face clouded over. "I was their best man, and I even came to have my doubts." his smile returned, victorious. "I was their best man, so naturally they came to me first."

"But why you?" Drake wondered. "You'd already had your take on it, twenty years ago. You're deeply entrenched in the London underground, now. You're not a company man -you're an outlaw! Why would they want you to pick up where you left off?"

"Pick up?" The Deuce's face wore a confused look for a moment, and then recovered. Grinning again, he pulled a bottle from beneath the bar. "Let's drink. Whiskey?"

"Looks the same, tastes the same." Drake lilted softly. "A double."

The Deuce poured. "You see, they don't want us to be Number Twos, Drake. Number Twos were always just appointed flunkies. We're better. You never broke and I finally outgrew the servants' role. They want us to be Number One." he toasted Drake. "They want us to run the place, for God's sake."

They drank, and The deuce poured more drinks. "Why me. I destroyed their precious Village. I broke out."

The Deuce put the bottle down. "Precisely, Drake. They need you body and soul. Twenty years ago we thought we could get you by bending you until you broke, but now they know -the only way to have you is to have you by your own free will. They need someone who will take charge and think creatively and serve them and their orders with a degree of free thought - and the only people who are both qualified and independent enough are you and I." The Deuce knocked back a shot. "Without us, they'll have to take a chance on some boot-licking executive. Who knows what kind of horror The Village will turn into."

Drake sipped his third whiskey. "If you're so concerned, why didn't you accept the job?"

The Deuce made a sour face. "Concerned -no. I know how they think. I was once one of them, and I know how they think. I was only trying to explain it all to you."

"To make it clear."

"Yes."

"To put my fears to rest."

"I suppose."

"To convince me?"

The deuce paused. "In a sense."

Drake pounded the bar. "Once, twenty years ago, I ran for office."

The Deuce's face sobered. "Twenty -"

"I ran for office on a less work and more play platform and everyone voted for me." he frowned, rubbing his temple. "I apologized, but there was no need."

The Deuce poured himself another drink. "That -"

Drake glanced up, his eyes hard. "It was fixed."

"I don't -"

"I drank with my fellow candidate that time, as well."

The Deuce stopped. "Now, really, Drake, that is an accusation I will not -"

Drake stood, towering over his companion. "Tell me, are you still a number? Are you still Number Two? Did they add or subtract you and does it matter? Are you perhaps a fraction now -not half the man you used to be? Are you a puppet, no longer in charge of coming up with your own plots now, but merely a minor actor in them? Are you a real number or imaginary -if I remember correctly -which I didn't always- sometimes I met people who weren't really there. Tell me, Number Two. Tell me why we're talking here, now." he stared at The Deuce. "Tell me your name."

The Deuce bit back whatever he was about to say. "Name?"

"Your name, man. After twenty years, you shouldn't have much left to hide from me. We're not numbers anymore -or are we?"

The Deuce seemed stunned. "My name?"

"Your name."

"To tell you the truth," he replied, sounding lost, "I'm not sure I can remember."

"Try."

"Try? Yes, must try, I suppose." The Deuce looked at Drake in fear. "Let's not argue, old chap. The last time we argued -"

"You died."

"You killed me."

"You killed yourself. Your name!!"

The Deuce paused. "If I tell you my name, you'll trust me?"

Drake raised an eyebrow. "If I believe you."

The Deuce laughed, booming. "The years have not worn away

that crusty charm of yours, old chap. You never did trust anyone."

"I wasn't born that way. The job changes us."

"So it does. And The Village didn't help, eh?"

"No." Drake said, filling his glass. "The Village didn't help.

Your name, my good man. Or I'll be leaving."

The Deuce studied Drake for a few seconds, scratching his beard. Then he raised his glass. "Then I wish you a good trip, Drake."

Drake looked surprised. "No names?"

The Deuce shook his head, almost sadly. "Not for us, old boy. To you I will always be Number Two. To me, you will always be Number Six. Even when we know our names, it doesn't help." he shrugged, almost apologetically. "It is too late for us to be anything but tired old enemies."

Drake studied his glass, half full. "My God. And here I thought you were working for them."

"I had my chance." The Deuce said. "So -you believe me?"

Drake shrugged. "I suppose. If you had been working for them, I supposed you would have said anything to keep my confidence."

The Deuce squinted at him. "Suppose, though, that I knew how you would react, and held back?"

Drake sighed, sounding tired and, to the Deuce, old. "The paranoia has to end somewhere, doesn't it?"

"Quite so."

They sat for a while, drinking. "Will you take the job?"
The deuce asked after a bit.

"Will you?"

Neither replied. Finally, drake poured himself another drink. "I wonder? If one of us takes the position, will the other find himself

-"

"Imprisoned?"

Drake nodded, sipping whiskey.

The Deuce's eyes sharpened. "I think it is quite possible." he said slowly.

Drake turned away, and gathered up his cat, which had fallen asleep in its cage. "Interesting. You, I would imagine, hold no love for me."

The deuce nodded. "None. And you for me?"

Drake smiled. "Less."

"Then, my good man," The Deuce boomed cheerfully, smiling hugely, "then it seems we have a whole new cast to the problem, eh? No longer do we have a job that neither of us wants -now we have a challenge. Just like in the old days, eh? The winner is Number One, and the loser -"

"The loser is just some other number."

The deuce' smile was still huge. "Quite so, old chap. And what a difference between the two there is. It's a question of survival, I'd say."

Drake opened the front door. "And I as well."

The Deuce frowned, his eyes turning cold. "Be seeing you," he said slowly, "number six."

Drake paused in the sinking sunlight of the outside world. "And you." he murmured, and let the door close behind him.

CHAPTER FOUR: Up and Down The City Road....

Drake noticed that he'd acquired two pale goons in dark suits almost immediately after leaving the bar, because old habits were by far the hardest to get rid of. Without betraying his knowledge, he turned down the street and walked, slowly, watching his followers from the corners of his eyes. Number One cried plaintively to be freed, and he cooed to it absent-mindedly, his thoughts bent on how to either lose his pursuers or at least discover who they were. He knew who they worked for, because they each carried umbrellas in the sunny weather.

Feeling old juices running in his system, he led them on a merry chase. There hadn't been many who could beat him at the game twenty years ago, and he hoped that that was still true today....of course, as good as he'd been back then, they'd still taken him. It had taken months of planning and a good deal of technology, but it had been done.

He crossed the street, appearing casual, his mind racing.

One of the pale goons disappeared into The Queen's Pawn, the second continuing on nonchalantly. Drake suddenly broke into a trot, smiling when his pursuer stopped in shock and bolted after him. They hadn't, he thought, expected an old man like him to start running around. Ducking down an entrance to the underground, he raced down the stairs and into the old subway tunnels. Quickly, he took a few turns and found himself on a platform, just as the doors were closing on the train. He stopped running, even though a kindly-looking girl held a door for him. he waved and smiled sardonically,

looking around and settling against the wall, to the right of the entrance. Carefully, he set Number One down, and waited, flat against the wall.

The pale goon burst into the place and watched the train pull off, slowing down and cursing. After a moment, Drake stepped forward silently and hooked an arm expertly around the man's neck, tightening just enough to cut off the man's wind.

"Wonderful day for a walk, eh?" Drake huffed, feeling out of breath. "I wonder why you've got such an interest in me."

He released the man just enough, and waited for him to catch his breath. "Don't know -"

"What I'm talking about, yes, I thought you might say that." Drake glanced around. No one else was on the platform. "Suppose I just wait for a train to roll in and give you a slight push on your way, eh?" he shook his captive roughly. "Eh? Maybe just before the wheels cut -"

"Alright, alright...." the man wheezed, ceasing his struggles. "Alright. What do you want?"

"Why were you following me?"

"Orders."

Drake's smile turned ugly. He squeezed again, and the man started to twitch uselessly. "Oh, my friend, you'll have to do better than that."

"You....left amer...ica." the man gasped. "You left and Howes just wanted to keep track of you. That's all."

Drake leaned in and put his mouth next to his captive's ear. "Now, my pale friend, I have a message that you can give to Control, eh?"

After a moment, the man nodded.

"Tell them that I will get in touch with them in MY own time, in MY own way!" he hissed. "Tell them that I'm not Number Six any more, and I'm not Number One yet, so do not push me. Tell them that I am extremely sensitive about being followed, observed, or spied on. Tell them I do not like having files updated or my marbles played with. Tell them to back off!"

"Yes, number six."

Drake squeezed again, and the man had breath enough to cry out before it was cut off. "What did you say?"

"Yes, sir."

Drake shook his head. "No. Not even sir. They called me that too, you see. Tell them one thing more."

"Yes?"

Drake stepped back, letting the man slump to the ground, choking. "Tell them that next time they try to break a man, they should make sure they hang on to him. If you beat a dog often enough, he gets mean. I'm mean now. I'm not the civilized spy they used to adore so. Tell them THAT, will you?"

The man scuttled off, breaking into a shuffling run. Drake watched him, then gathered up Number One, sat down, and waited for the train. he knew where he had to go next. It had never worked for him before, but he rather thought there was a first time for everything.

CHAPTER FIVE: A Return To Arms

He took a meandering way through London, pausing here and there to waste time and make sure he had acquired no other followers. As a result it was nightfall by the time he had stopped by the hotel to deposit Number One and then made his way to the unmarked offices he had once called home.

Drake knew the way. As he walked down the familiar halls, he could feel like nothing had changed, that he had simply been on a twenty year assignment, finally finished. Like a thousand times before, he walked into the warmly decorated office, and even though it was a woman sitting behind the desk instead of the bald little man he had left behind so many decades ago, he still had to stop and smile, staring around.

"May I help you?" the woman asked, polite but surprised. Few people found their way accidentally into the office. It was well hidden and very, very unmarked.

"No, but you may be able to help me. If you could please ring up Cobb in -no, wait," Drake frowned, pulling his confused memories together. Cobb would never do, Cob had been one of the Warders.....

"Could you Please ring up Stevens in room B and tell him that Zed-M 73 is here and he wishes to discuss our ongoing bet?" Drake said. "The codes may be a bit out of date and I'm sure he isn't expecting me."

She stared at him, blue eyes and blonde hair, picked, he thought, to disarm potential trouble-makers with her perky good looks. He thought he was far too old to be disarmed. "Then perhaps I

should -"

He waved her silent. "Just place the call, miss. You've nothing to lose. Either they'll wave me through or send the bullies in to herd me out -either way I've got the answers I came for, in one fashion or another." He smiled and nodded, sitting on her desk casually. "Make the call."

She shrugged and picked up her receiver. The phone had no buttons or other markings on it. "B, please." she said, studying Drake as he toyed with a pencil. "B? I have an aged gentleman here who wanted me to say that Zed-M 73 is here and wishes to discuss your ongoing bet?" She listened, her eyes widening. "Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Right away." She hung up.

"Go on through." she announced grudgingly. "Mr. Stevens will see you. Seems rather eager to see you, actually." She added.

"Thank you." he murmured, sliding off the desk and through the door that opened for him. Within moments, he was within a second set of offices, all warmly furnished and quite relaxing. And, he knew, all thoroughly wired and observed. Sitting behind the desk in this one was an old man even older than Drake, his shaking hands resting on the desk-top. He stared as Drake walked in.

"My God!" Stevens exclaimed. "It IS you!"

"Yes, Stevens, It is I." Drake held out a hand. "We are, I hope, still friends outside the sphere of this place?"

Stevens hesitated only a moment. "Yes. But I must say I'm about the only one left. Anyone else, whether they think you alive or not, has you marked as a traitor."

"Fartheringay." Drake snorted derisively. "The bastard probably blackballed my name from here to Washington before he finally died. The rest of them probably just wishing I was dead, since

they lost track of me and their precious little Village."

"SSssshhh!" Stevens hissed, holding up a hand. "That has been, for the last twenty-five years or so, one of those words you can't say around here without a file being started on you. Be careful, Dr- er, friend."

"Quite so. The dragons are everywhere, eh?"

"Quite so."

Drake patted his old friend on the shoulder. "Can we talk, somewhere? Can we meet later? I've tried to rely on old friends before, Stevens, and one by one they have betrayed me. Now my need outweighs my caution, and I finally come to you. Can we meet?"

Steven looked around. Nervously, he nodded. "Yes. Later. I'll see you at the Palace of Fun Tavern, nine o'clock." he glanced around again.

Drake joined him. "It seems The Village has been spreading, Stevens."

Stevens jumped at the word, but only nodded.

Drake moved off. "Soon, I wonder if we'll be able to tell the difference between The Village and the rest of the world? I'll be seeing you at nine, Stevens." he paused in the doorway. "And, thank you."

Stevens nodded, and sat down as Drake left.

Outside, Drake walked slowly, thinking. He didn't pay much attention to the streets, because as he had said before, the paranoia had to stop somewhere. He had long ago decided that he was going to die a sane man, even if that meant dying long before his time.

CHAPTER SIX: Burdens and Prisons

Drake squinted in the dim interior of The Palace Of Fun Tavern, shaking off his raincoat and smoothing back his wet hair. For a moment he almost expected everyone in the place to stop and stare at him in quiet expectation, like they always seemed to in The Village. Then he blinked and shrugged the old nightmares off, and scanned the lively place for Stevens. After a moment he found him, sitting at a table far in the back of the place, shadowed and nervous. Drake ordered a Whiskey Sour from the bar, waited for it, and then made his way back to join his friend, sipping his drink.

"Bad omen for us, this rain." he said, grinning slightly and looking around. "Water was never kind to me."

"Whatever do you mean?" Stevens asked, lighting a cigarette.

"How many times did I believe I was free....." Drake said, trailing off and staring off into space. Then his eyes snapped back, fixing Stevens in their piercing gaze. "The water has always betrayed me, is what I mean."

Silence bubbled up for a moment. Stevens puffed deeply. "You never were much of a drinker, John."

Drake glanced at his glass. "Spend a year or so denied something, even something you never really wanted, and you come to crave it more than anything you ever did want. I have, indeed, turned into a lush. I drink mostly to prove that I can still get drunk, anytime I wish to."

"Why did you ask me here, John? We haven't so much as written a line since you disappeared back in '67. I knew you were alive.....but what I thought had happened to you was something else."

Politics aside, we're still friends. But I'll need some straight talk from you."

"Politics." Drake snorted. "That's what happened to me, Stevens. Politics. I was kidnapped. I was bent to the point of almost breaking. My name was smeared by that weak-kneed traitor Fartheringay -"

"He was working on orders, John." Stevens pointed out. "They don't consider him a traitor."

"That's the way this administration looks at it." Drake said, shaking his head. "Ten years from now, when the last of the old men and women who run it all die off and are replaced -then what will they call him? Or will his file be blacked-out and removed? Will Fartheringay even have a history, ten years from now? Or five?" He sipped his drink. "Politics, Stevens. They call it all manner of things, but it comes down to politics."

Stevens signaled a waitress. "I think I'll join you in that drink." he said.

Drake nodded. "Don't think I'm not aware of the risk you're taking to help me, Roger."

Stevens sighed. "Especially since The Village is back on-line again. They have a place to send us, again." He leaned forward. "Now, what do you want from me?"

Drake swallowed the last of his drink, and as the waitress came over they both ordered stiff drinks. "What I need from you, Roger, is..." his voice faltered, then steadied. "Information."

"Well, ask now, or forever hold your piece, sir. In an hour or so I'll be sloppy drunk, and by tomorrow I may be gone, if they hear about this meeting." his smile was pale and thin. "This may be your only chance to ask me anything."

"And you're my last friend in the know." Drake added.

"And I'm your last friend in the know." Stevens agreed. "Well, I've waited twenty-plus years to return some favors you did for me. Shoot."

"Oh, I'd like to. But I think I'll stick to questions for now. You know that The Village has been re-funded?"

Stevens nodded around his drink. "Two months ago."

"And they're looking for someone to run the whole operation."

"Project Pennyfarthing." Stevens said. "And they have a very short list of candidates for the number one position. All of whom have long, deep secret experience."

"Shouldn't you say 'both of whom'?"

"I suppose I should."

Drake's eyes caught Stevens' and held them. "So that was how you knew I was alive. That was why you weren't surprised to see me."

Stevens coughed. "Unfair, John! I was surprised to see you -I rather thought you would stay away from the offices."

Drake smiled. "It always was their weakness, never watching their own backs. Arrogant lot, the bunch of them. They're always so busy watching everyone else you can dance around in their own backyard to your hearts content, and never be noticed."

Stevens shrugged. "As you say. At any rate, the two candidates are not what you might call obvious choices."

"Because of their uncooperative pasts."

"And their independent natures."

"Not to mention," Drake added, "the fact that we both had a little something to do with the destruction of the place and the failure of the original operation."

Stevens waved it aside. "As far as paper evidence of that

debacle, you'd be hard pressed to find it. Officially, funding ended in 1969 and the whole thing was simply put on hiatus for twenty-three years. But they want people intimately familiar with the place, creative and intelligent, with care-worn espionage skills -and who hadn't been broken." he shrugged. "You see, that left you and....the other. The final chairman. It was that last requirement that narrowed it down."

Drake nodded, "I can understand."

Stevens leaned in close, his face flushed with the beginnings of intoxication. "Johnny, are you considering their offer?" he asked.

Drake's gaze sharpened. "Why?"

"Don't." Stevens said, grabbing Drake's jacket. "Don't. Run again. When I came across the memos I hoped you would just run, disappear again, and leave them staring in disbelief." he sighed, slouching back. "But I guess it's true, they can predict us all down to how many heartbeats a day, eh? They had you pegged like you were scripted."

Drake reached over and pulled his friend forward roughly. "What is it, Roger? What is it!!?"

"Don't feel very -"

"What?"

"Light-headed..."

Drake slapped his friend. This time people nearby did stop to stare. Drake stared back "Someone call an ambulance!" he snapped. When no one moved, he half-stood. "NOW!" One of the waitresses dropped her tray and ran off to the rear of the bar, and Drake sat down again.

"Roger, what's going on? Tell me what you meant to. Roger!"

Stevens' eyes fluttered open. "Don't do it, old man. The Village

was re-funded conditionally. They've got six months. They need to find out.... and to find out, they need the two of you." he mumbled.

Drake shook him. "God-damn you, Roger, what for!?! What do they need us for!?!"

Stevens sighed. "They need to find out why they failed. Hundreds of successes, easy as cutting butter, then....you two come alone and laugh at every technique.....They need to know....why....and to find out, they need you both.....one to resist.....and....."

"Yes? And?"

Stevens began to sink in his chair. "And.....one to develop new.... techniquessss....."

Sighing his final S, Stevens slumped down and stared ahead, blankly. Drake felt his neck for a moment, and then stood. He stared around at his fellow customers. "He's dead." he said simply, throwing some money on the table.

Ignoring the calls from behind him to stay and await the police, he gathered his coat and left the tavern.

Outside, he found an entirely different set of pale goons waiting for him. One smiled and pointed at a nondescript black car.

"The Deuce needs a word, Sir."

Drake looked from one to the other, through the rain which was dripping off his chin. "In my younger days, my tall friend, I could have taken on the both of you." he said, feeling older than ever.

"I'm sure."

Drake shrugging, getting into the car. "They've robbed me of two decades. But I'll get it back." he smiled, clenching a fist. "With interest."

CHAPTER SEVEN: According To Hoyle

"Things happen so fast once they get started, eh, my good man?"

Drake glanced at the driver, catching his grinning face in the rear-view. "Doing your own driving, these days?"

The Deuce shrugged, steering the car back into traffic. "I'm sure you know what it's like to have freedom thrust upon you, after a long sojourn amongst gilded cages." he explained.

Drake looked out the window, streaked with rain, and nodded. "Yes, I suppose I do."

"So fast." The Deuce said. "Once the terms of the game are set, we meet twice in a day, and you pay a visit on our old friends."

"Not my friends any more." Drake said sourly, his pale eyes actually damp for a moment. "They've finally taken the last of my friends away." his voice was thick, and The deuce glanced back in dismay.

"Don't get sentimental on me now, old chap."

Drake's smile was horrible, a twisted wreck upon his face. "Never fear."

"Well then. The pieces are marked, the rules are layed. Now all that remains is to see the game played."

"You always did have a penchant for rhymes." Drake said, watching the streets go by. "Did you enjoy your visitor earlier?"

The deuce reached over to his left and picked up an umbrella. "Quite educational. Did you get as much information, I wonder, out of yours as I did mine?"

Drake shook his head. "I doubt it. I had to go a slightly more

expensive route for my lessons. Did you end up with a dead body, as well?"

"I'm afraid so. He just wouldn't listen to reason."

"I didn't see a funeral."

"Can't always manage that. you need a body, you see."

Deja-vu rippled through the car, and then all was clear again.

"You see," The Deuce continued, "there is a major difference between then and now, Number Six. Back then, I was merely a cog in their organization."

"All organizations need cogs, Number Two."

"Now, I have my own organization around me. A wall of people. A maze of my own devising. They can't threaten me the way they did twenty years ago. They took their eyes off me for a few years, and I slipped away. Now I have a wall of people, and they can't just pluck me out whenever they desire an audience."

Drake nodded. "I see you sent the same message that I did. I, however, do not need an 'organization'."

The Deuce chuckled. "Oh, my dear, dear chap, that is where you are so terribly wrong. You DO need an organization. And I'm afraid there isn't much time for you to put one together from scratch. That leaves a pre-existing one, and there seems to be only one of those opening its doors to you."

Drake continued to stare out of his window. He tried the door handle, and wasn't surprised to find it locked, though he hadn't locked it. "Ah. And why, if I may ask, do I require an 'organization'?"

The Deuce paused a heartbeat before replying. "You know, then, that there is no doubt that we will both return to The Village? That one of us will be Number One, and the other.....a prisoner?"

"Both prisoners." Drake said, his voice empty.

"Damn you, Number Six!" The Deuce shouted. "God-damn you! Can't you see through that haze of tortured paranoia!? Did we do such a perfectly imperfect job on you? Can't you see? Number One is Number One, there is no cell for him or her or it. And this time, there will be only one prisoner....at first. Once one of us figures out how to break the other, then the doors of the Village shall be thrown open -"

"Or barred shut."

"- once again, for the rest of the unanswered questions roaming free. Our scope has narrowed once again, Number Six. We aren't concerned with the world. There's just us. The pieces are marked, and they are you and I. One will prevail and be Number One. The loser will be broken."

Drake raised an eyebrow. "Are you so sure?"

The deuce smiled. "We know each other better, in some senses, than anyone else has ever known us. We are intimate strangers, you and I. Who else could break us if not each other?" he nodded. "Believe me, Number Six, whoever loses this opening gambit will break."

"Or die."

"You don't have a suicidal bone in your body, Number Six." The Deuce sniffed. "You wouldn't know how to give up."

"You taught me a lot about giving up, back in The Village."

"You don't mean that."

Drake sighed. "I suppose not."

For a few seconds, they rode in silence. Then Drake broke it, clearing his throat. "Tell me, Number Two, why did we take this drive, eh?"

The Deuce didn't answer right away. "We started off as bitter friends, Number Six. We started off this day as possible allies."

"Yes."

"Now, we are mortal enemies."

"I am not your enemy."

"Yet. You don't have a choice. You will be." he sighed.

"Tomorrow, the game begins in earnest. I thought it was only fair to make sure we both knew the rules of the game before starting."

"Always fair, you. Always offering fair deals and explaining details." Drake felt the car roll to a stop, and tried his door. It opened.

"I suppose I should wish you good luck, Number Two."

"That would be sporting, yes."

Drake got out. It was his hotel. "I never was a good sport, Number Two. Poor loser, and all that." He walked up and leaned into the drivers side. "I won't be pushed, Number Two. I won't go back. I told Howes that I would murder rather than go back."

"Number Six!"

Drake nodded. "I wasn't kidding. I suggest you consider that before pushing me further. I want nothing to do with this insanity. I won't go back. I concede the game to you.....on the condition that you leave me out of it."

The Deuce stared at Drake in shock, his face white. "It can't be done, Number Six."

Drake nodded, a smile creeping across his face. "The monkey thought it was all in fun.....Be seeing you."

He turned away and stopped when The Deuce called after him. He didn't turn around.

"I will break you, Number Six."

"Yes. That's what they all said."

CHAPTER EIGHT: Mt. Everest, I Presume?

Drake knew someone was in his hotel room before he pulled his keys out, but unlocked and opened his door noisily anyway. When he flicked on his light and spotted Howes sitting on the bed, petting Number One casually and smiling, he hardly blinked. Putting on a show of disinterest, Drake pulled off his coat, hung it on the doorhandle, and dropped his keys on the night-table. Then he bent down and pulled his cat from Howes' grasp.

"I don't think I like you petting my cat, Howes."

Howes chuckled, standing up. "I thought that since you seem so adept at giving me the slip, I'd at least hang onto your cat." he thrust his hands into his pockets. "There's nothing in your files about being an animal lover, Number Six."

Drake bristled, and then seemed to calm. "There probably isn't anything about my hatred for pleased-with-themselves administrators, either."

Howes nodded. "Very choice, Number Six."

"Stop calling me that."

"Should I call you.....Number One?"

"I named my cat that."

Howes seemed perplexed. "So?"

Drake's smile approached real humor. "Tell me, did you name your dog Howes?"

The perplexed grin drained away and was replaced with anger. "Listen here, Number Six." Howes stressed the term viciously. "I didn't come here to spar words with you. You do love to talk, don't you? You just thrive on witty arguments."

"To have an argument you need wit on both sides, Howes."

Howes clenched his fists. "Irritating man!" then he pulled himself together. "I came here to tell you that if you want the job, I'll back you."

Drake squinted at him. "Why?"

"I think you're the best man for the job."

"The Deuce is a good man."

"Was a good man. Still good, I suppose, but.....well, let me put it to you this way. What would you say his chances of ever breaking someone like you were?"

Drake smiled. "None."

"Exactly, Number Six. But you broke him -or could have, if you'd pressed the issue, or proceeded with more care. Neither of which were your main concerns at the time. I understand that completely.

Drake shook his head in puzzlement. "I wasn't working for you." he growled.

"No?" Howes' grin returned, sly and slinking. "My mistake, then. But the fact remains that when the two of you went head to head, you won. I think that over-qualifies you for the job." he held out a hand. "Come back to us, Number Six?"

"STOP CALLING ME THAT!" Drake shouted. "I was never with you! I was a prisoner, and I will never be again!"

Howes pulled back. "Come, my dear chap. Never with us? Are you telling me that your year and months with us wasn't the most challenging time of your life? That it wasn't the only time you felt fully tested?" he lowered his voice. "Are you telling me you didn't feel that rush of superiority when you defeated our plans, because you knew you had beaten the best? Are you telling me, in all seriousness,

that your life hasn't been completely meaningless until I arrived at your door to pull you back in?" he raised his voice dramatically. "Are you telling me you aren't glad to be skulking about again, using your wits. I saved you from a life raising cats, Number Six! You're glad to be back!"

"No." Drake said faintly.

"Glad!" Howes pressed on. "And now we want to reward you with the highest position of authority we can offer. The best minds in our business matched against your own again. Only this time, with you on freedom's side. Able to go anywhere, do anything, talk to anyone about anything. As long as you attend to your duties."

Drake sat down. "No."

Howes nodded. "Yes. And you know that you loved it. You know you never truly existed, were never truly alive, except for that brief circle of months when you were with us. You know it." he sighed. "Accept now or accept defeat, Number Six. You have the job if you wish. If you decline, I'll have to go with our other candidate -and the consequences are quite clear. He will be in charge. We can't save you from him. He will be giving orders - and if one of those orders happens to be one commanding your re-internment in The Village, well, there isn't anything we can do -except wish you luck in destroying the place again."

"You know, Howes," Drake said slowly. Howes paused at the door and glanced back. "You know, in The Village they used to say 'you can go where-ever you want, as long as you come back to The Village in the end'. That was why the taxis were called 'local'." he smiled. "I guess things never change, do they?"

Howes didn't reply. Drake pounded the night-table. "DO THEY!?" he looked away. "You are still offering me jobs."

"It's a choice between freedom and....Number Six."

Drake stared at the floor, then shook his head slightly. "No."

Howes nodded, smiling. "Be Seeing you, then."

The door shut, and silence crowded in, elbowing everything else out of sight. Drake sat with his head down for a moment, and as Number One curled around his legs, purring, he reached down heavily and scratched its ears. "Why don't they leave me alone." he muttered. "What can they want from me now. They have to improve their technique, find out why they failed, with me. And for that.....they need me." he sighed. "Why can't they leave me alone?"

He didn't sleep that night. He knew that the pieces had been numbered and the rules had been layed. He sat up and stared out his window at a city that used to be his in so many secret ways, and began to plan murders.

CHAPTER NINE: The Hounds

He had dozed off.

The knock on his door was insistent and pounding, it carved its path between his ears and brought him up, panting, the cat leaping away with a hiss and a fearful glance. Sunlight, fresh-scrubbed from rain, filled the room blindingly, and Drake stood uncertainly in the middle of his room for a moment, blinking.

The knock came again. His eyes flicked to the door, and immediately he picked up his coat and put it on.

"Yes?" he called.

"Room service."

He pulled the unused sheets from his bed with a flourish, and began tying them together. "I didn't order any."

"Complimentary breakfast, sir."

He smiled. Pushing open the window as far as he could, he stuck his head out and peered down. Not too far for a young man, he thought. Not too easy for an old one -and possibly the last, if he fell and broke a leg or some other foolish thing.....

"I'm not hungry." he snapped, tying the end of his sheets to the water pipe that ran near the window. He cast about, looking for the odd things he might miss later on -keys, wallet, briefcase- and threw the sheets out, watching them as they almost made it to the alley below. He paused to raise an eyebrow at the three or four feet he would have to dangle, and then tossed his briefcase after it. "Take it away."

"But sir," the voice protested, "we can't!"

Below the voice, Drake heard the chinking of metal, and then

the loud whir of a drill. As he climbed up upon the desk and bent his frame out the window, the lock on the door began to jiggle crazily. Number One stared up at him, curious. Drake climbed down, clinging to the sheets, cursing.

"Old man. Stupid old man. Falling asleep. Twenty years ago, you...." he trailed off. "Twenty years ago, you were twenty years younger."

Hand over hand, he slid down the sheets, breathing hard and trembling. Halfway down, he heard the door above crash inward and several feet walk into the room. He tried to climb faster, wondering if they would cut the sheets.

A moment later, he had his answer. Scant feet from the concrete below, he had the sickly feeling of falling, and then he crashed into the earth as hard as he'd ever cared to.

For a moment he lay, blood trickling from his scalp into his eyes. He panted and tried to imagine his pursuers scuttling down the stairs, taking them two or three at a time, as young men did. Then he pulled himself up, paused to let his swimming vision clear, and plucked up his case and shuffled as quickly as he could for the open street.

He burst into a crowd of pedestrians, bloody, rumbled, and cursing. Glancing at the front doors of the hotel, he saw three large men in dark suits and sunglasses slide to a halt, staring at him.

For a moment, they stared at each other. Then one, smiling rakishly and stepping forward slowly, spoke up. "Come on, Mate, make this easy, eh?"

Drake smiled, both at his pursuers and at the men and women who stared at them all as they walked by. "You fellows should have stuck with gassing your prey, young man." he said. Then, with a wink,

he whirled and ran, pounding down the street, pushing people aside with muttered apologies.

The three younger men blinked in surprise for a moment, and then they ran after, offering no apologies to the people they shoved.

Wiping blood from his eyes and clutching his side painfully, Drake dredged up old memories of the city he'd so long ago left, taking turns more out of instinct than with any real plan. Running across the street, cars screeched to halts and skidded along as he raced past them. He glanced back, and his followers raced after him still.

He heard the pounding before he thought to glance up. Twisting his head back and up, he saw the helicopter rise up over the tree-tops, swinging around to bear on him. It was unmarked, it looked like any other helicopter, and it struck fear in his heart, because he knew where it's final destination was.

He turned his head back just in time to see the car he ran into, doubling over the hood as it screamed to a halt. He fell back onto the street with a thud, and stared at the sky for a moment.

"No clouds today." he slurred.

Then the helicopter circled into view, shadowed and menacing. Pulling his thoughts together, he sat up and used the car to climb to his feet. He look at the driver, a young woman who just stared at him.

"Are you alright, mister?" she asked, open-mouthed.

He raised an eyebrow. "Mister. It's been a long while since anyone's called me 'mister'." Then he ripped open the passenger door and climbed in. "Drive!"

She squinted at him in confusion. "Wha -?"

"Drive!" he commanded. She looked past him and saw the

three men bearing down on them, feet away. She instinctively hit the gas, and the car pulled away just as the three put their hands on the door. Drake grinned out at them, waving. "Be seeing you." he said, smiling sweetly.

"What's going on?" she demanded. "Who are you?"

Drake pushed hair out of his face, smearing blood everywhere.

She tried a new tact. "Who were they?"

"My enemies."

She bit her lip. "Hey, if I pull over, will you get out?"

"No."

"Are you gonna.....hurt me?"

"No. But I'd like to lose that helicopter before I let you leave me behind."

She squinted out the window. "Shit!" she exclaimed. "Hey, who are you? A criminal, eh?"

"No." he sighed, slowly catching his breath. He pointed then. "Turn right here. No, I'm no criminal. And those were not police."

She turned right. "So, what are you?"

He sighed. "A secret agent." he replied tiredly. "So secret, not even I know I'm one, apparently."

Suddenly, she was excited. "Wow! A secret agent? Really? You wouldn't bullshit me?"

He looked at her with a withering gaze. "Does it look like I'm kidding?" he asked tartly. "Turn right again."

She did. "I guess not. This is cool. Where are we going? Or is that top secret or something?"

He rolled his eyes and sighed painfully. "Yes. It's -" he paused to fight sarcasm. "- top secret, or something."

She smiled happily. "Direct away, secret agent man!"

"Turn down that tunnel."

She did so, drumming on the dashboard excitedly.

"Slow down."

She did. "Now," he said, "I'm going to jump out here, and wait. I need you to do something for me."

"What?"

"First, I think we'll need a -" he paused again, to swallow a smile, "- code-word. So we'll know each other, in the future."

"Wow." she said, awed.

"Perfect." he replied perkily. "Wow it is. Much better than Pop. Now, when I jump out, I need you to speed up and keep driving. They will follow you, I think." he opened his door and stepped out, running along side for a moment, and then shutting the door. The car sped up and burst back into the sunlight. The helicopter buzzed along behind it.

Drake brushed himself off, shaking his head, sarcastic smile in place. Then he turned, still sun-blind, and frowned, as he heard the low roar.

His eyes widened. He hadn't heard that noise....that animal/machine scream of rage.....he hadn't thought he would ever hear it again.

It was different, somehow, split and echoed, but it was the same horrible roar. It was -

"Rover." he said quietly.

His eyes adjusted, and he backed away blindly, eyes big and round with horror. Instead of the single, huge white sphere he had expected, the tunnel was filled with dozens of small spheres, rolling towards him like a herd, screaming and quivering with anticipation.

He whirled to run, and the screams intensified, sending chills down his back. He ran, and the lighted end of the tunnel approached, calling him, and then jumped out of view as he was knocked down. Screaming, he struggled against them, kicking and writhing.....and finally falling silent and still, as the tunnel faded from his view.

All was black.

CHAPTER TEN: Back In The Village

"Good morning, all. We have some important announcements."

Number Six opened his eyes creakily, squinting up at the ceiling that for a moment wasn't familiar at all. He put a hand to his head and found a bandage freshly placed there. He also noted that his clothes had been changed.

"The Village Council has commissioned an exciting new exhibition!"

Slowly, he sat up, and then recognized the room, the whole apartment. He jumped off the bed and stared around -nothing had changed.

"Number Eighty-five has lost a red-riding hat. If anyone has seen it, please return it to Number Eighty-Five or to the citizens exchange."

It was all just as he'd left it, it seemed. The bed half-unmade. The kitchen area clean and tidy. The radio, as usual, in the refrigerator. The whole place carefully kept just as he'd found it. he'd taken pains not to make it home.

"For a delicious treat, ice-cream will be available for the enjoyment of all citizens today!"

He dashed out of the bedroom and stood in the living room, eyes wide and mouth open. The television, the telephone -all of it, dated and old, some of it obsolete -all of it still there. Not so much as a knick-knack had been moved or removed.

"Today's flavor of the day is Strawberry!"

He looked up, finally hearing the announcements, and walked

over to the window. Thrusting aside the drapes, he let sunlight stream by him and squinted out through the glass.

The Village spread out before him, same as it ever was. The trees swayed in the sunny breeze, the colorful umbrellas marked the cafe, the green dome shined in the near distance. Number Six stared, for a moment, seeing his reflection in the glass and noting that he wore his traditional black jacket with white stripe, over tan pants and boat shoes. He stared, unable to move, transfixed by his sudden movement through time.

Then, he sneezed.

"Weather: Bright and sunny all day, with a cool breeze and a definite chance of rain later on in the day. Anyone taking walks on the beach this afternoon is advised to bundle up!"

He whirled, looking around, and saw the dust. There was inches of dust everywhere. He stamped up clouds of it as he walked. It hung heavy in the air and he felt it already settling on him.

"Can't control time, can you, you bastards?" Number Six muttered. "This place has rotted right along with me and you, eh?"

As if in response, the phone rang. Number Six looked at it, amazed that it still worked, and then walked over and plucked it up. Knowing he was being watched, he struck a casual pose. "Yes?"

"Good morning, old boy, good morning!" Number Two boomed over the receiver. "Glad to see you up and about after all you've been through. No ill affects, I trust?"

"No operator anymore, eh? Did she fade away, along with the sixties?" Number Six asked. "No maids either, I see."

"You are the very limit, Number Six! Now, come join me for breakfast. Number One, the -" "Two, the -"

"Green Dome, yes, I think I know the way."

"Splend -"

Number Six hung up.

No butler greeted Number Six at the white door marked 2, but he hadn't expected one. He didn't know where the little man who had never spoken a word in his presence had gone; he only hoped it was to a better hiding place than he had chosen. he didn't bother knocking, he walked in, through the antechamber, and didn't flinch when the silver doors parted for him.

Number Two sat in his dusty black sphere, looking almost the same way he had so long ago -his hair was long again, if a bit gray, and he wore his white bicycle on his jacket -this one reading the number One.

"Come in, Number Six."

"Hello, Number....One?"

Number One nodded. "The one and only. I suppose you can call me that from now on, eh? Clear up any confusion right away, that's my motto."

"Really?" Number Six mused. "I would think something more like 'his masters voice' or 'hear and obey' would fit you."

Number One clucked his tongue in annoyance. "How uncouth. Really, you used to be so polite."

"I've changed. the job.....changes us."

They stared for a moment, and finally Number One shook his head. "Sit down, sit down! For god's sakes, relax a little!"

"Are you, then, just an appointed flunkie again?" Number six asked, watching the chair pop up from the floor. "Just a balding, broken spy scuttling about his green dome like a crab carrying its house around?"

Number One frowned. "I scuttle, Number Six, only until you

lie shattered on the floor of this green dome."

Number Six sat and leaned back, leaning his head on a finger in a thoughtful pose. "Never."

Number One seemed surprised. "No? And why not?"

Number Six smiled. "I have good reason to resist."

"To the death?"

"If necessary. It won't be. Necessary."

Number One shrugged. "And what are your crosses to cling to this time, Number Six?"

"The fact that your funding is conditional."

Number One stopped to stare, then licked his lips. "Where did you hear that?"

Number Six didn't answer the question. "Your funding is conditional and I won't have to blow this place up again. All I have to do is come out of here a whole man or die trying, and your masters won't bother sending enough money to have the place dusted."

Number One nodded. "I see." he stood and pressed buttons on his console, lighting up his screens with images of The Village, empty, static, and dusty. "It's just you and I, Number Six."

"And so it was, once, two decades ago."

"The last time we argued."

"The last time you died."

"I'm more motivated now, Number Six. I'm not, as you say, an appointed flunkie doubting his new masters, as I was. Now I am my own master. I have reasons to break you." he smiled genially. "Good reasons."

"Such as?"

"Power."

Number Six looked away, smiling. "Ah, power. So expensive a

drug, so fleeting a high. You realize you are where you are because I chose not to be. They tried, one last, grandiose time, to make me take a number. I refused. You were panting at their door, and gladly gave away your name again. All for power not so different from prison." he looked back. "A fine Village you have for yourself, Number....One."

"Tomorrow, it begins, Number Six. I'll give you a day to re-acquaint yourself with your home, and then we battle."

Number Six didn't seem to have heard. He stared at the screens for a while, and then glanced back. "You're alone, you know."

"Eh?"

"There aren't any more spies in the world. Everything has moved on. The spies have become diplomats. Even if you do open this speck again, you'll be alone." he grinned. "Lack of customers, you see. We're a dying breed, these days."

Number One nodded. "But I only need one."

"You are One."

"I only need you. As far as I'm concerned, the whole world can just bugger off. I only need to break you."

"One is the loneliest number, Deuce."

"No more names."

Number Six stood. "I suppose not. That's too bad. I thought you said you were for freedom, now?"

Number One watched him walk to the exit. "I am. My freedom. And the choice was freedom or prisoner."

"And you chose prison?"

Number One shook his head, looking down and then back in confusion. "No."

The silver doors parted. "No? My mistake, then. Be seeing you, Number One."

"Tomorrow." Number One said quietly. The silver doors shut and the screens blinked off, leaving Number One in darkness.

"Tomorrow."

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Jacky's Got A New Master

The Palace Of Fun had gone to weeds. They sprouted up through the marble like thin green pawns, swaying in the wind. An umbrella, tattered and skeletal, lay in the center of the chess board, discarded years ago and moved only by the wind since. A taxi, overturned, its rubber wheels almost chewed away by rot, lay at the entrance, crashed into the stone archway.

The Cafe had gone to rats. They slinked boisterously in broad daylight, their nests appeared everywhere. The food, long spoiled, had turned to dust and been blown away. Most of the patio tables had caught high winds with their sail-like umbrellas and lay, rolling and scattered, on the ground. One had found its way into the clinging branches of a nearby tree.

The shops had gone to dust. Many of them locked up, most of the windows had survived and their interiors peeked out at The Village with dry, flaking eyes. The clock store clocks had run down and stared out with different times on their faded faces with unmoving hands. Some of their springs had sprung, and now stood, rusty and brittle, waiting.

The beach had gone to the sea. Picked clean, not a towel or dressing- tent remained to show that once it had been populated with prisoners.

The gilded cage had rusted.

Number Six picked his way desolately through every place in The Village, fighting the strange, creeping nostalgia that invaded him. He picked up tattered remnants of the Tally Ho, used for bird

nests and blown free by the winds, and studied headlines he recalled clearly. Without people the whole place was empty and silent and slowly but surely nature was reclaiming it all. The only thing that shone new and uncorrupted was the Green Dome, looking the same but repaired recently. It towered over the place like the future, a future Number Six was determined to thwart.

Eventually, bored, he made his way back to apartment number six, snapping his fingers to open the front door and feeling a sick little jolt of power when it worked.

Waiting, in the living room, was Howes.

Number Six stopped in his tracks. "What?"

Howes smiled. "Ah, Number One, glad to see you again. Getting reacquainted with the office? A bit run-down, but nothing a few million pounds wouldn't gloss over. Come in, come in -I've got a surprise for you."

Number Six walked in. "Not Number.....One, Howes." he said. "What are you doing here?"

Howes sighed. "Always down to business, eh? Oh well." he pulled something from his pocket and tossed it to number Six, who caught it with one hand and stared at it. "I still think you're the best man for the job."

It was a black disk with a white pennyfarthing bicycle on it. It was embossed with the number 1.

Six glanced up. "You've already chosen your man." he said crisply.

Howes nodded. "Yes.....well, it wasn't really my decision. And it doesn't really seem fair to give him all the advantages again, does it?" he waited for a reply, and then looked away. "For God's sakes, old chap, I'm risking my job coming here. This is strictly forbidden. I'm

handing you a chance to win this contest!"

Six studied the round disk. "How?"

Howes smiled. "Do you know what these badges are?"

"What they were?"

"Were and are. Computer access code broadcasters. If you're wearing the right ones, they allow you access to The Village Computers."

Six' grin was impish. "Oh? And which are the "right" ones?"

"That's one of them."

"This is One."

Howes sighed. "It gives you a chance, old chap."

"I never had a chance before."

"You were never this old before. And you came closer to snapping than I think you'd like to admit. For the past twenty-two years you've been hovering over the chasm. All it'll take is a little push, and you're on your way."

Six shrugged. "Is that why you came all the way here?"

Howes nodded. "I still think you're the best man for the job."

Six nodded. "How did you get here?"

"Still escape minded, eh? It won't do much. If you do get away -with me, for instance- we'll just pluck you back again. And then you won't have that badge to help you, Number One."

"I'm not a number."

"No? What are you then? The only place in the entire world that has any record of your existence is The Village. You've long since faded away from everywhere else." Howes turned for the door. "I've offered you hope of winning, Number One. Break your enemy, or he will break you."

"Either way you get what you want."

Howes paused in the doorway to turn back and shrug. "Yes, I suppose that's true. Have you any choice?"

Six smiled mysteriously. "None that you've given me. Perhaps I can create my own?"

"That's the spirit, Number One!" Howes said, saluting. "Be seeing you!"

"And you." the door shut. "You bastard."

He studied the black disk, shiny new. He supposed they probably didn't have very many of them. There probably hadn't been very many Number Ones, if there ever had been any at all. After a moment he walked over to the phone and picked it up. "Hello?"

"Yes, my good man?" Number One replied.

Six raised an eyebrow. "How convenient."

"No one else to call, old man."

"You realize we're being used?"

"To get what Control wants. Yes."

Six frowned. "And that changes nothing for you?"

"Still a matter of survival, Number Six. One still wins, one still loses. Still a matter of survival."

Six nodded. "Indeed. Tomorrow then."

"Tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWELVE: Back In The Saddle

Tomorrow dawned clear and bright, as usual, but the loudspeakers didn't blare taped announcements, and when Number One emerged from the Green Dome, umbrella in hand, it was almost noon. He carried a black doctor's bag, the leather cracked and the clasp rusted, clutched to him as he panted down the steps, across the street, and across the square to the apartment marked 6: PRIVATE. He paused outside, as if hesitating, and then strode in, the door gliding inward with a squeal that seemed loud in the still Village air.

The interior of the apartment had been cleaned, somewhat; dusted and re-arranged. The television had been smashed, and Number One smiled at the sight of it.

"Haven't lost that impetuous rage, eh?" he muttered. "Still striking out at what you can't control, you egomaniacal megalomaniac."

Sleeping the deep, untroubled sleep of the drugged, Number Six lay in the bed, cheeks stubbled and still dressed in yesterdays clothes. Number One sat down on a chair and stared at him for a while, stroking his leather bag absently as he watched the steady breathing.

Slowly, he opened it and peered inside, reaching in and pulling a syringe and an odd, bowl-shaped wire mesh.

"Simple and straightforward." he murmured, putting the bag down. "The best plans always are. Break down resistance and inhibitions, implant new codes and beliefs -" he leaned in and injected Six cleanly and professionally "- and sit back and wait for the answers to dribbled into your hands. That's the way to do it all."

he held the wire mesh in his hands. "Let's see.....we tried your childhood, and found you had always been an intractable bastard. We tried your paranoia, and found it encompassing and impregnable. We erased you and edited you and wreaked havoc on your consciousness -only to find that there was something much deeper, much more essential, and much less reachable that made you what you were. At the core, you were made of opaque, undentable metal."

He sighed, and placed the mesh on Six' head like a skullcap.

"There's only one thing left, old friend. We even tried your dreams once -I played the old tapes of them last night, just for fun-and came up closer than ever -but empty." he leaned back. "All that leaves us is your nightmares." he grinned empty and blank. "I have a feeling we're already in there, as characters."

He stood, collecting his syringe. "I suppose I'll have to move you down to the inner chamber, old friend. I'm sure you'll feel quite at home there. You spent so much quality time there, whether you remember or not, and I think we even have some of your favorite toys left, down in the DA room. I was always partial to the see-saw, myself."

Humming a familiar tune to himself, he exited the apartment and made his way back across the square, across the street, up the stairs and into the green dome.

A few moments later, the put of an engine filled the empty air, and he drove up the street in a Village taxi, with a gurney attached to the end.

He pulled right in front of the apartment, went back in, and dragged Six out to the gurney. Six safely strapped in, he hopped in the front and pulled off.

Far off, gulls cried out.

The inner chamber, half rock, half ventilation shafts and metal twisted into form, hadn't sustained much damage and so hadn't needed much repair. As a result things looked much the same as always. Number One stared at Six strapped into the gurney, hooked up to wires and monitors and arcane machines whose use One had forgotten, and all he wanted to do was check himself in a mirror and see if Control had really found a way to transport them back to nineteen sixty-nine.

He cocked an ear for a moment, half expecting to hear "All You Need Is Love" to bubble up from the speakers.

"Been sleeping well, Number Six?" One asked. "I doubt it. I haven't had a full night's sleep once in the last two decades, and I was lightly scarred by this place. I imagine you wake up in cold sweats. I imagine that you scare that cat of yours occasionally, moaning, tossing and turning. We took your brain apart too many times, Number Six. I can't swear we put it all together correctly each time."

He walked over to a shiny new machine, covered in dials and screens and one bright, plastic red button.

He placed his finger over the button, then paused. "Computer!" he snapped. "Village File 0106887383, record mode. New paragraph. For the record, " he stopped, staring off into space. His voice echoed slightly in the chamber, and came back to him in ripples. "For the record," he continued quietly, "I have sold my soul when I press this button. I do this freely. Note it duly when the outcome is filed. End record."

His eyes, misty and flat, returned to Six. "Goodbye, old friend." he said, and pressed the button savagely.

Number Six screamed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: In Darkness, Where the Shadows Lie

Number Six screamed.

He sat up, clutching his hands to his head, eyes wide and heart pounding, vocal cords shredded. Veins stood out on his neck, and the scream went on and on, echoing off into the fields long after he'd shut his mouth.

He stared around, panting. The sun danced on the lilies and the wind danced with them; the white flowers stretched off into the distance. He was in the middle of a field, huge and bright, sitting atop a gurney. He stared at his hands, which were streaked with blood, and felt his head again. He had something on his head.....it was sharp and dug deeply into his skull, anchored, rooted in place, a million sharp points, leaking blood. It ringed his skull like a crown and he didn't even think of how much trying to pull it off would hurt. He left it where it was, squinted against the pain, and swung his legs off the gurney.

Off in the distance, he heard bagpipes.

He was wearing his usual Village suit: tan pants, boat shoes, the dark jacket with the white stripe. Pinned to his jacket was a black disk, marked One. Crinkling his lips in disgust, he ripped it off and threw it, watching it as it spun through the air, disappearing impossibly far away.

Frowning, wiping blood from his eyes, he felt his chest, wincing in pain. He pulled his jacket off, and then ripped his shirt off his back, and stared in horror at his chest. Painfully scabbed over, a white disk embossed with a pennyfarthing bicycle was embedded in

the skin of his left breast. It bore the number six in black. The skin had grown in around it, and as he dug his fingers in, trying to pry them underneath, he cried out, blood bubbling down his chest, skin peeling back. Finally his blood-slick fingers found some purchase and ripped the disk from his chest, letting it hit the ground as he fell to his knees, arms outward.

All was silent, and he could hear the beating of his heart.

It seemed to rise in volume, he only became aware of it slowly as it fought the wind and the gentle shifting of the flowers. He frowned and opened his eyes, looking down at the hole in his chest, looking into his' own body, and seeing his heart beating, black and round.....and marked with a clear number 6.

He looked up at the sky, saw the dark shapes circling in the clear blue skies, and tried to scream again -and nothing happened.

When he awoke again, the dark shapes were closer, but nothing else had changed. He felt his chest and found a thick scar where his wound had been. He felt his head and found his tortuous headgear still in place. He sat up and pulled his shirt back on. The bagpipes had faded away, but he thought he could still hear them, when the wind shifted the right way.

He stood, and paused. The lilies had turned red.

The wind shifted again, and now a familiar roar, faint but certain, came to his ears, sending a chill down his spine. He whirled and saw, far off, rolling over flowers and leaving a clear path behind it, Rover. The white sphere -animal or machine, he had never discovered- screamed in fury as it rolled. Man or machine, the scream was feral and mindless, and Number Six ran from it, trampling his own trail of crushed flowers as he did so.

He turned to look where he was running, and stopped, almost

falling over himself. A second sphere rolled towards him, screaming and identical. He stared back and forth between the two for a moment, and then scanned the horizons all around him. White spheres rolled at him from every direction, closing in tighter and tighter.

Screams, feral and mindless but human, assaulted him from above, and he looked up to see the dark flying shapes above him. They were horses, stallions, black and winged, ridden by ghostly but familiar figures whose eyes glowed red. They dived and circled, coming closer and closer, screaming in triumph and joy.

One, blonde and fair, wearing glasses, skinned back his lips from perfectly white teeth. He wore a golden medallion around his neck, heavy and dangerous.

Another, a woman, wore an odd costume of green and brown, with sheer leggings. She scowled down at Number Six, her short brown hair blown by the wind.

One swung a sword around, cutting himself on its sharp blade carelessly as he did so, screaming in useless rage.

Thirteen in all, they circled and closed in, and Number Six crouched down, covering his head with his hands, shivering with frustration. He couldn't move, he couldn't run, or think, or cry out. He was paralyzed. He felt the Rovers moving in, hungry, and the wraiths above sink lower, hateful, and all he could do was crouch below, shivering with frustration. The screams swirled together and mixed and grew so loud he couldn't make sense of them anymore, and he fought his frozen limbs and lungs and mind -and finally, just as he was sure they were just upon him, he broke through and rose up, screaming -

His voice echoed empty. He was alone again, in an empty

field of red lilies.

"Why, hello to you, too."

Six turned, hands up in a warding gesture. Then he put them down, slowly. "What," he croaked, licking his lips. "What are you doing here?" The man standing before him was old, wearing a suit slightly out of date and style. His white hair was thin and wispy, hidden beneath his hat. He held a cane in one hand, and used it to gesture with. "Who else would you expect?"

"You," Six stuttered, looking around and still breathing hard, "you got me into all this."

"Me?"

"You didn't tell me it would end like this."

The ancient man shrugged. "Wasn't it worth the risk?"

"Half my life gone!"

"Half your life worth the risk."

Six looked away, suddenly more resentful than frightened or angry. "You recruited me, old man. You should have told me it might end this way."

The ancient man sighed. "There is a way to end it."

Six turned back. "How!" he demanded. "HOW!"

The ancient man smiled. "Why," he asked quietly, holding out a hand, "did you resign?"

The bagpipes blared suddenly. Neither noticed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: The Chasm

Number Six took the hand, and they began to walk.

"Why did you ask me that?" he pondered, looking around. All the riders had disappeared and the rovers had rolled off, and all that was left was the swaying field of Lilies and the wind. "Are you one of them, too? Maybe you recruited me, so long ago, just to get me here, in the long run, eh? My whole career a prelude to imprisonment?"

"One of them?" The ancient man asked. "No. The paranoia has to end somewhere, doesn't it?"

Six looked at his lined face, and nodded. "Yes, yes it does. So, then, why are you here?"

"In your nightmare? Simple. Number One has planted me here, to ask you why you resigned."

Six smiled sadly. "Planted. So you are one of them, in a way."

The old man shook his head. "I'm not a ghost, Johnny." he said quietly. "I'm a memory. There's a difference."

"Is there?"

The old man's smile was mysterious. "For our purposes here, yes."

They walked, and slowly but surely (but much more quickly than Six would have expected) the lilies gave way to woods and more rocky land.

"You want to know why I resigned." Six asked.

"Very much so. Passionately so."

"If I tell you, they win."

"They have to win."

Six stared at him. "You would never say that." he accused.

The old man raised an eyebrow. "No? I might, if it meant something other than what you expect it to."

"A riddle."

"A puzzle."

They walked in silence. After a few moments, Six raised his free hand and saw he had the Number One disk in it. "Look. I have this."

The old man nodded. "It might help."

"Why? When?"

"If you give them what they want."

"They want me!" Six cried. "I can't!"

The old man shook his head. "Not just you, Johnny."

Six stared at the disk in puzzlement, and then his eyes widened. "Not just me." he repeated softly.

They climbed an uphill grove of trees, threading in between the trunks as they went. They crested the top and paused, staring down at the valley, and The Village. It lay spread out before them, a perfect duplicate, sunny and neat and dusted, exactly as it had been twenty years before.

"Not me." Six lamented, looking at his hands. "I'm old."

"Not as old as I."

They waited a moment more, and then descended into The Village. It was empty and desolate even though preserved, and Six allowed himself to be led through streets he knew too well, across the streets, across the square, up the stairs, to the green dome.

The two of them stared down at the Inner Chamber. Number One stood over a complicated piece of machinery, pushing buttons and reading printouts. Number Six lay on a gurney, strapped down and calm, hooked up to all manner of equipment. Occasionally,

Number One shouted out orders to the Village Computer. "Now what?"

The old man let go of Six' hand. "Now is up to you. You don't have much time before he realizes you're much too calm and pumps more drugs into you to wrest back control."

Number Six nodded, straightening. "I'm ready."

But the old man was gone.

Silently, he padded down the stairs, unsure if Number One could see or hear him, or if he was just a representative illusion his own mind provided, free of charge. He crept along the shadows, and finally out into the open, joining his sleeping self quietly. For a moment he just stood over himself, pondering the old man before him, wondering, briefly, if it was really worth saving himself. He supposed he could just as easily die on the gurney, and still go a winner, of sorts.

He shook his head. There was no other way, now. Too many years, too many battles had been fought. He was part of something bigger, now, than just his own personal freedom. He reached down and shook himself.

"Wake up, Drake."

He frowned when his sleeping self continued to doze. He shook himself violently. "Wake up! Wake up!"

Drake opened his eyes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: The Sting

Drake opened his eyes.

He sat up, ripping wires from his skin, pulling the mesh of metal off of his head and leaping from the gurney, shoving it aside violently. It skittered across the floor on squeaking wheels, crashing into the rock of the opposite wall. Number One looked up and stood back from his console, and for a moment they stared at each other.

"You hollow, petty thing." Drake hissed.

One shrugged. "I sold my soul, Number Six. No low was too low."

Drake moved forward briskly. "I'm afraid I'll have to prove you wrong on that score, old man." he said.

Number One took a calm step back. "Computer, security breach code number seven!" he cried out. Somewhere, an alarm started to blare.

"Belay that order, Computer!" Drake snapped, and the alarm wilted into silence. Number One stared at Drake.

"How -?"

Drake pulled the disk from his jacket. "A gift from your superiors, you fool. You came full circle -you trusted and got smashed, made a cynical deal and became number two, escaped when you could, and then, after all those lessons, you trusted again." Drake shook his head. "Not smart, Number One."

He was mere steps from One, who continued to back up nervously. "Six, let's be reasonable, eh? I was merely playing a survivor's game!" he bounded away at an angle, gaining space. "Computer! Neutralize Number Six in M field!"

Something hummed above, but drake didn't even glance up. "Belay THAT order as well, Computer." the humming ceased. "Seal the Inner Chamber, Computer." he added.

Bolts clicked into place with echoes.

"Reverse that order, Computer!" Number One shouted.

"Thinking of running?" Drake asked, following Number One around. "Ready to admit defeat?"

"No!" One shouted, then calmed, glancing behind him to make sure his retreat was unobstructed. "Can't let you just order my computer about though, can I?"

"You were going to turn tail and run!" Drake accused. "I don't think Control would have liked that."

"No!"

"Why were you going to run?"

Number One shook his head. "I wasn't! I swear!"

Drake's smile was cruel and ironic as he chased Number One slowly around the chamber. "Come now, have you just realized there's no escape? Let's make a deal. Tell me why you were going to run, and I'll let you go."

"Let me go?" Number One asked, his voice dim. "You?"

Drake held up his disk. "I've won, old chap. Why were you going to run?!?"

"I -"

"Why!??"

"But -"

"Were you committing suicide?"

"Why, no, I -"

"Were you admitting defeat?"

"No -"

"Were you fleeing your responsibilities?"

Number One looked around desperately. "Stop it!" he cried.

"Were you feeling guilt?"

Number One sat down on the stairs tiredly, looking around.

"So you'll break me again, eh, Drake?"

Drake stood over him. "It's almost too easy, with you."

"That's what they wanted."

"No." Drake shook his head. "They don't want you broke. They could have broken you at any time. They'll accept you broke, but what they really want is for me to break you."

Number One looked up, his face sweaty and confused.

"What?"

"They want me on their team, even after all this time. They brought us here hoping it would end this way."

Number One stared at him in horror. "And what -" he swallowed. "What are you going to do now, Number Six?"

Drake's smile dried up. "I'm going to snap you like a dry twig." he replied.

Number One stood and began to back away again. "No!"

"Yes."

"That's not you, drake! That's against all that you stand for -"

"Stood for."

"- all you hold dear -"

"Held dear."

"- all you believe in!"

"Believed in. I've changed. The job -changes us. Why did you run?"

"Computer! Contact Control!"

"Why did you run!?!"

"You won't hold me! Computer!"

"Won't we?"

"Contact Control!" Number One sank to the ground. "Contact Control! Contact Control!"

A mechanical voice, male and businesslike, boomed over the Inner Chamber speakers. "Control here."

Number One sat on the ground, his face in his hands. After a moment, Drake looked up.

"Control," he said crisply, a smile blooming on his lips, "this is Number One speaking. Subject is ready for full questioning. He will offer no resistance."

There was a pause. "A transport will be dispatched for you both. "Shall I report that you have.....signed on, Number One?"

Drake's smile broadened. "Oh yes, do report that, won't you?"

The voice picked up some emotion. "Splendid! You'd be surprised at how many old friends of yours are glad to have you at long last."

Drake shook his head. "No I wouldn't. One out."

"Control out."

Drake knelt next to Number One. "Old man, last time I gave you your freedom. You squandered it. This time, I give you what you deserve."

"Anything." number One wept. "I'll tell you anything."

Drake looked up. "Computer! Access history files, Number Six. Commence erase and discard mode."

"Commencing." the inhuman computer voice replied.

"What -" Number One looked up. "What are you doing, Drake?"

Drake stared at him. "Are you ready to tell us everything?" he

asked. "A simple matter of what you were thinking, old man. A very simple matter of what was in your head."

"Who are you?" Number One asked, his voice small.

"The new Number One."

"I am Number One."

Drake smiled broadly. "You," he said harshly, "are nothing."

Number One looked at the floor. "Yes, you're right. You're right! Believe me! Believe me! I'm ready! You've won, drake! You've won!"

"I've won." Drake answered, getting up and locating the black doctor's bag by the console. he opened it and fished out several ampules and the syringe. Number One watched him in horror.

"What are you doing?"

"What I should have done a long time ago." he answered, picking out one of the ampules and filling the syringe. "I'm getting a monkey off of my back."

Number One cringed. "I'll talk, Drake! I'll talk!"

Drake leaned in and rolled up one of Number One's sleeves. "I know you will, my good man." he breathed. "I know you will."

Number One swooned, and Drake let him fall back.

He stood, smoothing his dirty clothes and looking around.

"Computer," he called. "unseal Inner Chamber."

Bolts clicked open.

"ETA of Control transport?"

The computer paused. "Twenty-five minutes." it replied.

"Keep me apprised, at five minute intervals." he ordered. Then he bent to pick up Number One, and sought the errant gurney.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Endgame

Two men stood in the sunny wind by the helipad, one standing with his hands thrust in his pockets, the other lying peacefully on a gurney. Below and around them the Village was silent again, and empty. The standing man squinted into the distance, picking out the speck of a helicopter, quickly approaching.

"Five minutes until transport arrival." the computer intoned.

"Thank you," Drake said crisply, "initiate new program: Drake Loop Cycle."

"Commencing."

Drake glanced at his prisoner. "Time to go." he said. "Free at last, eh?"

The man on the gurney didn't reply. Drake shrugged and looked back at the growing blot of helicopter on the horizon. "And though the danger must be growing, they show no signs of slowing, though they don't know where they're going, they simply keep on rowing." he muttered quietly. He looked around. "You know, old chap, after all this time and energy, I'm still not sure where this accursed place is."

The helicopter filled the air with the bellowing flutters of its blades cutting through the air. Drake stared up at it as it settled onto the helipad, and watched with interest as one of the two people within stepped out and ran towards them in a crouch. He stopped in front of Drake and held out a hand, the sun shining on his bald head. The years didn't seem to have touched him at all, and Drake stared as they shook.

"Welcome." the bald man said. He adjusted his glasses. "Glad

to finally have you. So many of us, glad to have you."

"Yes, at long last and all that." Drake nodded. "So good to be wanted."

The bald man looked at the man on the gurney. "Any instructions regarding him, Number One?"

Drake glanced at the gurney. "No." he said.

"Well, the colonel wants a full report ASAP, you know." the bald man said. "Mustn't tarry long."

"Of course not. The Colonel still in charge, then? How - comforting, someone doesn't change."

The bald man shrugged. "Many Colonels. A Colonel, still in charge. People are changeable, the jobs are not."

Drake squinted at him. "You are not. You remain."

"I do."

"Number -?"

"No number. A title."

"Title?"

The bald man nodded. "Supervisor."

"Tell me," Drake said, staring off into the sky, "Has anyone been involved here since the beginning? Anyone still holding a position?"

The bald man smiled, a snapshot grin gone as quickly as it appeared. "We mustn't tarry, Number One. The Colonel wants a report."

"Even the Colonel, just a number."

"No. A title, Number One. Numbers are Titles and Titles sometimes numbers." the Supervisor pointed at the man on the gurney. "Do you require assistance with him?"

Drake glanced at his prisoner. "No. Thank you."

"I'll take you."

He turned and walked off to the helicopter. Drake pushed the gurney and followed. Then he pulled open the hatch and hauled his prisoner into it, panting with the effort, but not for long. Then he joined the Supervisor in the front, and they lifted off. The Village seemed pristine and oddly beautiful in the dying sun.

"Here," the bald man said, pulling files from a briefcase. "You will be expected to have a report regarding interrogations on the Colonel's desk by ten tomorrow. In specifics, your reasoning and technique in breaking our second great failure this week. Also, you will of course file a standard confession concerning your activities from the year 1948 to 1967."

"Confession?"

The Supervisor stared. "Routine, Number One."

"It sounds so guilt-ridden. Medieval. I've done nothing wrong."

"Come now, we all have, Number One."

Drake shook his head. "Not me."

The Supervisor shrugged. "Very well. It is still required; term it what you wish. Here is a listing of all possible tenants in future operations. You will of course be expected to devise personal tactics of interrogation for each if they are selected for tenancy." he handed Drake a thick bunch of papers. "Case files, personal histories, et cetera, will be provided to you as you choose each for tenancy"

"Of course," Drake said. "I look forward to meeting them."

The bald man shook his head. "Meet them? Once you are installed, Number One, you are incognito. No one meets you."

"Quite."

"Also, you will have to choose a new chairman."

"The new Number Two?"

"Yes. A listing of qualified candidates is here." he handed over another stack. "If you have any to add, please feel free to do so."

"Feel free?"

"You're in charge."

Drake stared back at The Village, a speck. "Quite."

They flew on in silence, then. A coastline, quickly recognizable as the British coastline, came into slow view, enlarging into reality as time went by. They landed some miles inland, setting down in the final minutes of afternoon. A black limousine waited patiently, and Drake followed the Supervisor into the back.

"Where now?" he asked.

"Home."

Drake blinked. "I don't have a home, really. Not anymore."

"Now you do. We have a place for you, Number One. Quite comfortable. I'm sure you'll learn to love it."

Drake nodded. "I've meant to ask you about vacations."

"There are many places to go."

Drake looked at the bald man. "I see."

"Do you?"

Drake nodded. "Go on."

"Here is a listing of returning and new staff. Many of them are excited to be back, finally. Of course, no one ever truly left, better to say they are glad to begin work again." he handed over another huge stack of paper. "If you object to any, please submit reports stating why."

"Of course."

"You understand the importance of your position -"

"Naturally."

"You are Number One -"

"Naturally."

The Supervisor frowned. "Here we are."

Drake looked out the window. They were outside a brown building in a city he wasn't sure he knew. Two men dressed in black suits waited outside, stepping forward as the car pulled up.

"Be seeing you." The Supervisor said. "Number One."

Drake saluted, but said nothing as he stepped out of the limo, carrying his heavy pile of paper. The limousine pulled away on quiet wheels, and Drake smiled at his two new companions.

"Nice night."

One of the pair shrugged. "Sure."

"A night like this makes one want to just take a walk." he didn't wait for the response. "Have you got a cigarette?"

"Smoking? You?"

"Age makes vices seem less dangerous." Drake replied. "That's an order, man. Cigarette. Now."

"Yes, Number One." he reached into his jacket.

Drake tossed his papers into that one's face, whirling to punch the second straight in the face. He turned in time to duck a swing from the first and ran his head into the first's stomach, pushing him roughly against the wall of the building. He pulled back and watched him slide to the ground for a moment, and then turned to face his other adversary -but the second still lay on the ground, bleeding.

He smiled slightly, smoothing back his hair and bending to gather up stray papers. Then he stood and looked back. "Be seeing you." he said, smiling. He still wore his Village clothes, and walked off into the night whistling.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: Nothing At All

The sun peeked through the clouds occasionally, shining on the old streets of London for a few moments at a time, drying the rain from the night before in bursts. The rest of the time it was cloudy and thick, windy and silent. The cars were muffled and the people kept to themselves, eyes on the pavement, as they walked by. No one noticed drake as he carried his bags from the hotel, hailing a taxi.

"A beautiful day."

Drake turned at the voice, smiling for effect rather than out of humor. "Why, if it isn't Howes. My favorite flunkie."

Howes' plastic grin was unflinching. "Number Six -"

"Six? Demoted so quickly?"

"You seem to have left the fold." Howes explained. "No longer management, you must be a guest once again."

"Is that the way it is? Can't one be merely outside the scope of the game?"

Howes shook his head, chuckling. "You either make the rules or play by them, Number Six. You never seem to learn."

"Oh, I've learned." Drake said, smiling. "I've won. You can take that to your doppelganger Colonels and Number Ones and tell them that I am out and about and I have the means to bring you all down to my level."

"Means? Oh, the files, yes. I suppose you think we're worried about those -"

"I know you're worried about those."

"Oh? And how do you know that?"

Drake's smile turned sunny. "I'm still free to go, eh?"

Howes' smile flickered. "Ah, yes. You are still walking around, aren't you?" he sighed. "You acted circles around us. What will you do with your time, now?"

Drake sighed. "Travel."

"No plans to go public?"

"Not now."

"No care for our future tenants?"

Drake's smile mellowed. "We all have our problems, Howes. They are not mine. No one shed tears for me."

"Don't be so sure."

"Why are you just letting me walk away, Howes? I've been waiting for hours for the pale goons to track me down."

Howes raised an eyebrow. "Walk away?" he mused. "I didn't realize we were."

Drake frowned. "What?"

Howes thrust his hands into his pockets. "Number Six -may I call you Six? Six, we offered you a chance. We offered you a chance to live again. After twenty years of living in a much smaller prison than The Village, we offered you real life again. You rejected it. Do you love your prisons so?"

"No." Drake said. "No more prisons for me."

"No?" Howes smiled. "Do you know how to live without us, Six?"

"I'll learn."

The smile dried up. "You won't have to, Six."

Drake leaned in close. "Listen to me you meaningless hump on the skin of the earth. I've won. If you so much as glance hard at me, these files will see the tops of desks all over the world. I know

who to send them to, I know how to, and I've arranged it. There are still people in this city who don't mind being woken up late and who don't work for you. I've won. Just let me go in peace!"

Howes' expression didn't change. "You know almost nothing at all, Six. What do you think has changed?"

"Everything."

"Nothing at all, Six. The rules have shifted. The game changes again. The pieces will have to be picked out and the rules layed again, but the game goes on. And on. And on. It is more personal than you can know. It is more eternal than you have ever imagined. It goes on and on."

"Not with me."

"Different players. Different winners. All on the same side."

"But not with me."

"Different techniques. Some work, some don't -all succeed in sum"

"But not with ME!"

Howes smiled. "It never ends."

Drake stood back. "It does with me." he snapped. "Lay a hand on me, Howes, and your empire of deceit and cells comes down with me."

"No escape, Six."

"Taxi!" A car pulled up in front. As the driver got out and began to load the back with Drake's bags, Drake opened the back door.

"No escape."

"And why is that?"

Howes shrugged. "Where will you go, Six?"

"Anywhere I wish."

"And we will be there. We will be everywhere. Be seeing you."

Drake stared. "No."

"Be seeing you tonight. And tomorrow. And forever!" Howes called over his shoulder, laughing. "Oh! Wait!"

He turned, reaching into his pocket. He pulled something out and tossed it to Drake, who caught it easily. It was a white disk, embossed with a PennyFarthing Bicycle. The number on it was a clear 2.

Howes smiled viciously, and saluted. "Now, be seeing you?" he called, and turned away.

Drake stared, wide-eyed, for a moment, from disk to Howes and back again, until Howes had disappeared around a corner. Then he turned to the driver and put the disk in his pocket. Tiredly, he sat down and closed the taxi door.

"Airport." he said.

The driver grinned pleasantly at him. "Sorry, sir." he said. "Local service only."

End