

Preface

Chester Basin, NS, March 16, 2014

When I first set out to write this book, I had my mind on Russian prisons, so I started researching famous and infamous prisons: Butyrka, Lubyanka, and Lefortovo.

Then a news story caught my ear: The Russians, in gearing up for their Sochi Olympics, were worried about terrorism. Time to Google. What terrorists could be bothering the Russians?

Next thing I knew I was sucked down the rabbit hole — Chechens — then the Putin nightmare began. Putin has always, for me, triggered a gut-reaction of mistrust. I started digging into his history. Did he have a dark side? Next thing I knew I was up to my neck in an article by Scott Anderson, a book by Alexander Litvinenko, and another by Masha Gessen, stories by Oleg Kalugin, culminating in a CBC National News piece in April, that featured all of the above.

Before I knew it, I decided that Michael's perception of the situation, as well as the mission, had to be much bigger than a simple rescue and exfiltration. I felt a need to remind the world of Mikhail Trepashkin and Alexander Litvinenko. Then, the character of poor damaged Natasha Cherninova began to evolve, until she took me completely by surprise.



D.C. Rhind, Chester Basin, NS, 2014

Prologue: Michael

Chester Basin, NS
November 15, 2013

Confined, unable to move.
Of course! He realized that, just emerging from vampire sleep, from the void, there might still be a certain paralysis. No — it was more than that; the air was stale.

Then — too strange to explain — his face feeling like it didn't belong to him — like he was wearing someone else's skin! He was! So was Carrie, so was Tony. They were all wearing someone else's skin, and about to venture out into unknown territory.

Urge to panic — his innate warrior nature immediately suppressed that.

So I'm about to advance into unknown territory wearing someone else's skin. Get over it!

His eyes snapped open and he sat up, Kato grumbling a complaint at having to relinquish possession of his shoulder and upper chest.

Was that a dream? Dreams almost never intrude on vampire sleep — well, there was that time in Romania when Carrie was in trouble, but that was more clairvoyance than dream.

He got dressed, glanced at Carrie, still comatose, Teila curled up in the crook of a raised arm.

Take a walk, he decided. Check on the boat — it's been windy the past few days — make sure it has nothing to do with the boat — What could feeling trapped, stale air, and wearing someone else's skin have to do with the boat? Okay, so check on the boat and think while you're walking.

1: Mason

*Vauxhall Cross (SIS Headquarters), London
November 14, 2013*

Captain Bruce Mason finished reviewing the latest batch of field test results for a group of *Double-0* agents for whom recertification had been due. He placed the pages in a file folder, then locked the folder in his top drawer.

Cynthia can file that when she comes back in tomorrow morning, he told himself.

He was about to leave when the phone on his desk rang. He answered it to find nothing but silence on the other end. Frowning, he repeated his *Hello* twice, then hung up. Then his cellphone, a smartphone, did the same thing.

It was beyond curious — such events were becoming more common. At his flat he routinely found long silent messages on his answering machine. He'd had his phone line checked, had the answering machine checked — even gone so far as to replace the device. Caller ID was blocked, and even experts from Q-branch were unhelpful — no way to trace the caller.

Rising from his desk, he glanced out the window, his gaze coming to rest on Thames House, the home of MI5, across the river. He'd come close to passing the

mysterious phone-call issue on to them, but had balked — he could just hear *C* making his usual fuss about giving MI5 another chance for a botch-up — *C* was a tad elitist when it came to the sister branch of the *Secret Intelligence Service*.

Bloody Hell, Mason thought, *5 would have solved the mystery by now — this sort of thing is their daily fare, after all.*

There had been hope among some, himself included, that the MI6 and MI5 apparatus would have been housed together in Vauxhall Cross upon the building's completion, making better cooperation possible. MI5 dealt with domestic intelligence, whereas MI6 was responsible for foreign intelligence. Knowing from more than forty years of experience how many grey areas there were, Mason had been of the opinion that housing both SIS agencies under one roof might have helped, but bureaucrats on both sides had other views. MI5 had its roots in Military Intelligence, whereas MI6 stemmed from Naval Intelligence.

Maybe you should have stuck with Naval Intelligence, old boy, he mused; then, *No, if you'd stuck to Naval Intelligence, you'd never have met Tony or Sam or a host of other friends.*

He shook his head, got up, grabbed his topcoat, and exited his office.

"I had no idea you were still here, Cyn," he announced to Cynthia, his secretary, still at her desk.

"I was just about to leave," she admitted with a smile. "It's just after 7:00."

Mason nodded. "Oh, by the by, there's a file in my top drawer that needs filing first thing in the morning. *C* might also want a copy."

She smiled again. "Why don't I just look after that now, then it's done, just in case Sir John wants to peruse over morning tea."

Mason easily read from her demeanor that she wasn't as eager as she might seem to add more to an already long day.

"Off you go," he insisted. "It'll still be there in the morning. By the way, did you put a call through to me a few minutes ago?"

Cynthia frowned, then shook her head. "No, sir; there was a call — I saw the line light up — but I assumed it was personal to your direct line, since it went straight through."

Now it was Mason's turn to frown. "I suppose it could have been personal — I really can't say. In fact I have no idea who it was; there was no one on the other end. In fact, I've been getting a few of those lately, always a blocked number."

"Well, that is odd," Cynthia commented.

"Indeed," Mason agreed. Then, musing aloud, he added, "I've gotten the same at my flat, including long blank messages on the machine, even after replacing the bloody thing."

"Well, that's enough for tonight. I'm off to the club for a Scotch, then dinner, then home to sleep before it all starts again tomorrow."

"Here, let me help you with that," he offered, quickly grabbing her coat and holding it for her.

"Thank you, Captain," she said, flashing him a more radiant smile.

"Not a bit, Midshipman," he returned.

"Your car should be waiting down front" she added. "I knew you'd forgotten again, and took the liberty of having Robert stand by."

Chagrined, Mason commented. "It was infinitely easier when I was a *Double-0* and drove myself. Lots of things were easier, including remembering trivia."

Cynthia frowned. "I know for a fact, sir, that you *never* forget the important things. Besides, I should have buzzed you about arranging your driver."

“Nice try, Cyn,” Mason admonished from the doorway, then headed for the elevator.

As promised, his car was waiting for him in front.

“To the club, Robert,” he told his driver as he entered the back of the classic 1962 Bentley S2.

Robert nodded, started the engine, pulled away from the curb, then headed south the short distance to Vauxhall Bridge, turned right onto the bridge, then proceeded across the Thames, then left onto Grosvenor Road. They hadn’t gone far south of the bridge before Robert pulled over.

“Sorry, sir; I’ve got a warning light on the instrument panel — shouldn’t take but a moment.”

He got out, raised the engine bonnet, checked a few things, frowned, seemed about to lower the bonnet — He suddenly went rigid, raised a hand to his chest — it came away bloodied — Then he slumped against the car.

Mason pulled his Walther PPK and reached for the door handle.

The door locks clicked down.

The front–rear divider window elevated into place.

There was a hiss of escaping gas. Instinctively he took a deep breath and held it, trying unsuccessfully to find a way to escape the car.

Within ninety seconds, he started to blackout from holding his breath. Whether he wanted to or not, he was about to start breathing in whatever gas had been released into the car. It had a sour smell at first, then he couldn’t smell anything. Everything faded to a foggy blur. The foggy blur faded to black.

2: For MI6

Chester Basin, NS

November 15, 2013, 3:00 PM

It was a cool afternoon, cooler than usual for mid-November in Lunenburg County. Some yellow leaves still clung tenaciously to a few oaks and maples about the new house. Mike had awakened — he still called it that, though he no longer thought of it as sleeping — he passed out for about three-and-a-half hours each day, from anywhere between 11:00 and 11:30 AM, until about 2:30 PM. Most of his kind seemed doomed to remain incapacitated from sometime after full sunrise until shortly before sunset, but Mike functioned reasonably well until closer to noon, when the deadly sun was at its zenith. Of course, Mike had also proved that, for him, the sun was no longer as deadly as it was for most vampires — well, those that weren't sorcerers as well, or blessed with ancient blood.

As he walked back from the boatyard, enjoying the fading feel of fall and the whispering warnings of winter's approach, he felt *Myrddin* in his mind.

Something troubles you, Michael.

He nodded. *Yes, Myrddin, but I have no idea what. The boat's fine, all covered up for winter — I thought the wind might have damaged one of the tarps.*

He told Myrddin about the bizarre images and feelings that had come upon him just as he was emerging from the void.

Something of consequence must have caused your instincts to intrude on your consciousness while still in vampire sleep. Your Wiccan powers are more profound than you accept, Michael. You've honed your warrior skills, and embrace those aspects of your Wicca nature that contribute to them, but, despite your declaration in Austria nearly three years ago, you still haven't completely embraced what you think of as sorcery — what makes you, as your Japanese friends call you — Maha-ka. Perhaps — Have you checked on all your friends? Tony? Jonathan? What about Heather in Scotland — I really liked her; you know.

Mike smiled, remembering how much joy meeting Merlin had given the elderly witch that Mike and Carrie had originally met in Rostock, Germany as Madam Olga. She and her son, Alex, had been posing at Gypsies, using that as their cover while, as agents for the *Scholomance*, they surveilled a particularly sadistic and bloodthirsty vampire.

He glanced at the angle of the sun.

It's just after three, Merlin said in his mind, then, I'm sorry; you were probably about to judge that for yourself.

Once more Mike flexed the corners of his mouth into what passed for a smile on most introverts. He left the road and stepped into the trees at the edge of his property, passing through the outer pines and firs until he was beyond the inner ashes, birches, oaks, and maples. He walked the broad slope to the side deck, then wended his way down the rocky slope to the back and the entry door into the basement, a simple turning gesture of his hand causing the door to unlock.

Inside, he continued past the nearly-finished guest bedroom, past the red velvet curtain that marked the

entrance to their home theatre, then on toward his office, immediately after the door to the downstairs bathroom.

The door looked like the door to a castle dungeon, complete with barred inspection portal and even a stone surround trim. Mike opened the door and stepped in, turning on a wall cresset that looked early Victorian. The walls were covered in stonework wallpaper, except for where two large bookcases, painted black, housed Mike's library from their former house in the city.

He turned left past one bookcase, rounded the corner of his desk, which was hidden behind that shelf, flicked the switch that lighted another antique replica, this one a Georgian hanging lantern, dangling by a chain from the ceiling.

He turned on his desk lamp, then collapsed into his office chair.

"*Raowrrrr*," Kato yowled, announcing himself as he stomped his way down the stairs. He appeared around the corner of Mike's desk, and uttered another long-drawn-out complaint.

"I'm sorry," Mike apologized, seeing in Kato's thoughts the image of the Siamese cat waking, not knowing where Mike had gone or when he would return. "It's getting cold out; you wouldn't have liked it. Besides, Wayne's dogs are out, and the big one barks at everything — well, not me so much."

He continued to pet Kato, who purred and settled into his lap, paws against his chest, then reached to the button at the back of his iMac, booted the machine, and waited for his word processor to load. He was reviewing his efforts to outline a new novel, when his desk phone rang. Caller ID said *CSIS Halifax*. Mike frowned. Charbonneau would have displayed as *CSIS Ottawa*, but Jean always called Mike on his iPhone, which was encrypted and much more secure than any landline. In fact, there'd been very few calls from

Charbonneau since Mike's adventures in Austria back in 2011.

Mike answered the phone, to be told that he would be getting a call on his iPhone almost immediately from the Director of CSIS. Mike acknowledged receipt of the information, then hung up, immediately removed his iPhone from his pocket, and placed it on his desk. He frowned — the director was supposed to field all contact through Charbonneau. It was part of the price of Mike remaining in active service after being wrongly declared a rogue agent four years before — *Ronin* was how Mike usually thought of it, falling back on the Japanese term for a rogue *Samurai*. He'd gotten tired of the director pestering him at every turn, constantly trying to armchair-quarterback his fieldwork. He'd been close to resigning, a fact that had brought the director near to panic, especially with his predecessor backing Mike, and Sam Larkin smugly declaring how the CIA would snatch Mike up in a New York minute, with a substantial increase in salary. The director had relented.

CSIS just didn't have the straight-forward view of things that CIA and MI6 had. It probably stemmed from their confused origins — CSIS had been formed in the mid-1980s to replace a former RCMP body, initially a counterpart of Britain's MI5. Mike's role in CSIS was an anomaly, much closer to that of an MI6 *Double-0* asset. His official title was *special agent*. He was CSIS's only special agent, recruited soon after agreeing to help Tony Dewhurst deal with an Interpol case. HRM PD, Mike's godfather in particular, had been baffled by a string of murders that looked like vampires on a murderous rampage.

More than two years before, Mike had climaxed his CSIS career by destroying the last holdouts of the elitist group that had hoped to establish vampire dominance over humans. He had almost been burned to

death, surviving an entire day in the sun. That, plus identifying a terrorist bomb-maker with links to Al-Qaida, had granted him extended leave from CSIS.

Indeed, over the past year, he had had very few cases, and almost all were mundane, most having almost nothing to do with vampires. He'd spent much of that year doing, almost single-handedly, all the work needed to finish more than three-quarters of the basement. He had done the framing, drywall, and finish trim. Carrie had done the drywall mudding, sanding, and all the painting. She'd even wallpapered his office with the amazing *dungeon* wallpaper.

With most of the construction work behind him, Mike had finally turned his thoughts back to writing. CSIS consistently interrupted his attempts at writing. His revenge: fictional versions of selected cases.

Now, as he glanced at his iPhone lying on the desk, he awaited yet another CSIS interruption.

The sound of clashing swords emanated from his phone, and the CSIS emblem appeared on the screen. Mike took the call on speaker.

"Yes, sir," he greeted.

"*Samurai*," the director stated without preamble, "I just got a call from the head of British Intelligence, concerning your friend Captain Bruce Mason."

Mike frowned, suddenly wishing that the director used FaceTime. It was easier to read facial expressions than rely on vocal nuances for what a person *wasn't* saying.

"Mason, sir?" Mike prompted.

"Has gone missing," the director finished for him, "and, well, *Samurai*, to get to the point, MI6 has officially asked to borrow you. No, that's not right — there's nothing official about it. By the way, his designation isn't *M*, it's *C*. Anyway, *C*, who is actually Sir John Sawers, personally asked me to lend you to him. As far as we're concerned, if you honour the

request, you'll officially be on paid leave. I can only assume they'll also be funding you in some way. What I do know is: if you do accept, there's a ticket waiting for you at Halifax International Airport for an 8:00 PM *British Airways* flight. And, *Samurai*, it would be a considerable coup for us to have MI6 owing us a favour for a change."

"Is Jean in the loop on this, sir?"

"Charbonneau? No; I can't see how he could be. C called me on my private line, and I immediately called you — well, not immediately; I called the Halifax office first to have them give you warning of my impending call."

Mike smiled — he'd hung up on the director a few times after the *Ronin* incident. "So what other facts do you have, sir, aside from Mason being missing?" Mike asked. *No wonder I woke up so unsettled! This must be what I sensed.*

"No idea," was the director's curt response, "well, not much. We picked up some chatter from the Americans, including what might be circumstantial evidence that's led to speculation that he's passed sensitive information to the Russians."

Mike's mouth tightened to a rictus. "Then it looks like I'll be heading for London, sir."

As Mike ended the call, he glanced at the clock on the credenza shelf above his desk — 3:40. He reached out with his mind. Carrie was still asleep — she rarely awakened before 4:00.

He activated his phone again and called Sam Larkin, Assistant Deputy Director: Operations, CIA.

"Hey, kid," Sam greeted. It used to annoy him that Sam insisted on calling him *kid* — Mike was older than Sam, but, even before his change to vampire, looked several years younger.

"Hey, Sam. What do you know about Mason?"

There was a sigh, then Sam said, "Not much, but he's missing, and circumstantial evidence points to suspicious links to the Russians."

Mike frowned, shaking his head. "I don't buy it," he insisted. "It seems *C* wants to borrow me."

"Yeah, I don't buy it either" Sam acknowledged, "We got a whiff of that MI6 request less than an hour ago. That must have stuck in *C*'s craw. You going?"

"I think I'd better," Mike said. "Okay, thanks, Sam. I guess I'd better give Tony a call. He'll want in on this. He and Mason have considerable history."

"Tell me about it," Sam retorted. "Back in the days of the Cold War, we crossed paths on so many cases that I started to feel like Felix Lighter, with Mason as James Bond." Sam sighed, obviously reminiscing about his friendship with Mason. "Anyway, good luck, Mike. If you need anything..."

Mike rang off, then called Tony, who answered on the second ring.

"Michael..."

"Switch to FaceTime, Tony" Mike cut across his greeting. When Tony's face appeared on the screen, he wore a perplexed frown.

"What is it, Michael? You seem perturbed."

"*C* of MI6 called my director personally. Seems he wants to borrow me. He said nothing about it except that Mason is missing. However, according to Sam, Mason is not just missing; there's circumstantial evidence linking him to Russian contacts."

Tony let out a whistle that trailed off. "*Please* say you're going," he said, almost in the same breath.

"Apparently a ticket awaits me at the *BA* desk, for 8:00 PM," Mike replied. "I was just about to throw a few things in a bag and grab my passport. Carrie's still asleep, so I'll wait for her to emerge from the void."

"So, you spoke to Sam?" Tony mused. "And he didn't have anything else to offer?"

Mike shook his head.

“Well, then, I’ll pack a bag, too. If you can swing by here on the way, we can take my car to the airport. I’ll just make a quick call and make sure I can get booked on the same flight, even if I have to pull a few strings.”

Mike smiled, knowing that, for *Lord Anthony Dewhurst*, getting a seat on a *British Airways* flight might not be too difficult, even if it meant bumping a less well-connected passenger from the flight.

“*Raowrrrrr!*”

Mike was just pocketing his phone. Kato stared into his face, brilliant sapphire eyes expressing concern, even worry. Mike gave a tight smile and scratched the side of his friend’s furry face. “Sorry, buddy, but it looks like I have to go away for a while” he said, whereupon Kato reached out a paw to his chest, then butted his head under Mike’s chin before rubbing his head against Mike’s face several times. Mike smiled, then gathered fourteen pounds of purring Siamese into his arms. Almost immediately there was a tiny *mew*, and Teila, Carrie’s cat, now about three-quarters Kato’s size, but still very much a kitten in her demeanour, appeared around the corner of the desk.

“Is your mummy awake or are you just getting independent?” Teila looked at him with wide eyes, then left, heading for the stairs.

“I think that’s our cue to follow,” Mike commented to Kato. Kato hopped down to the floor and followed Teila, allowing Mike a moment to open the credenza cupboard to his left and remove his Walther PPK and shoulder holster. Looking at the boxes of cartridges, he ignored the boxes of holly rounds with Osmium core, selecting lead hollow-points instead.

As he closed the cupboard, he glanced to the curved wall behind his desk chair. Atop his file cabinet was a stylized rack, each side carved from wood in the

profile an oriental dragon. An ivory-hilted katana rested on the dragons' claws, while *Mountain Wind*, the katana made in the 14th century by legendary master *Muramasa Sengo*, rested in the mouths of the dragons. For a prolonged moment he stared at the sword, debating whether to take it. If this mission didn't involve vampires — and there was no reason to think it did — then he wouldn't need his katana. But then, it would be the first time he'd ever set out without it.

He closed his eyes, trying to reach out into the void for some sense of the future, but nothing came. He shook his head, then triggered a shutdown of his computer and departed his office, the katana left behind.

Kato was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs, head cocked to one side. When Mike was just two paces away, he turned and leaped over the first four steps, trotted up to the turn, and paused, waiting for Mike to catch up. Teila was waiting at the top of the stairs. *Mew*.

Bright afternoon sunlight filtered through the window of the front door, illuminating the varied colours of the foyer's stone-tiled floor. Angling right, he followed the cats past the broad entrance to the combined living room and dining room to the left (the architect called it a great room). To the right, across the hall, an opening almost as wide provided entry to the kitchen, floored with the same stone tiling as the foyer.

Teila and Kato were hunched before the tray for their food dishes, looking expectantly at Mike. He resisted the urge to chuckle. Going to the fridge, he took out a can of *Friskies* (fish, of course). Kato attacked his dish with the ravenous attitude of a starved wolf, compared with Teila who sampled hers for a bare second, then went into a hunch to watch Kato.

Mike opened the pantry cupboard and extracted a tall plastic container of dry food, putting a handful in

each larger pet food dish. Before putting the food away, he paused to cup Kato's face in his hands.

Slow down, he projected. There's no panic. She barely eats her own food; she's certainly not about to eat yours. Kato hung his head for a second, then started in on his dry food, albeit a bit slower than usual.

Mike extracted two bottles from the upper left corner of the wine rack built into the end of the kitchen island. Most of the bottles were red wine for guests; these were an O-positive for Mike and an A-positive for Carrie. The rest were in the fridge, but Mike had found that he and Carrie could keep a bottle out for a day or more before the blood cells began to deteriorate significantly, and it made warming it much easier. In this case, Mike retrieved two ceramic goblets, warmed them in the microwave for a ninety-seconds, then poured some blood into each.

Continuing down the hall to the master suite, he set the goblets down on Carrie's nightstand, then walked to the other side of the bed, removed a small kitbag from his closet, set his Walther and the box of cartridges into it, then retrieved his wallet and passport from his nightstand. Two pairs of black jeans and his new black Otomix sneakers went into the kitbag, then he went through his bureau, gathering two black turtlenecks and an assortment of socks and underwear. He'd wear a suit and his Tony Lama boots on the plane. *If I need anything fancier, I'll have to buy it over there,* he thought, then replaced the turtleneck he was wearing with a clean one in dark royal blue.

Next he unplugged his iPad from the charger, unplugged the charger from the wall, and put those in the ballistic nylon case for his iPad, along with the charger for his phone. Pulling the velcro flap on the front of the case, he transferred his passport to the large pocket under the flap. There were additional pockets and holders for everything from business cards to pens,

even spare change. *No novel writing this trip*, he thought, and removed the Bluetooth keyboard and set it in the basket on the bottom shelf of his nightstand, *though being a semi-obscure fantasy novelist is a good cover for this trip, especially after having attended that convention in Austria.*

That's got to be enough, he told himself, looking at the scant handful of luggage. It seemed so small compared to the arsenal of weapons he'd gotten used to hauling around the globe — *sgian dubh* (small Celtic daggers), his *shirasaya* hiking stick with its hidden katana blade, and, of course, *Mountain Wind*.

He was still pondering all of this when Kato and Teila entered. Teila hopped up onto the bed and settled on Carrie's pillow, next to her face. Mike forestalled Kato as he tried to climb into Mike's bag.

"Not this time," he whispered, cuddling his friend, whereupon Kato rubbed his head and uttered a plaintive sound.

Mike was just setting him down when Carrie stirred. Her eyes flashed open, scanned left and right, looked confused, almost feral, then she struggled upright, looking about the room until her gaze came to rest on Mike. The feral look softened, then she smiled. The smile immediately faded to a frown when she noticed his kitbag and iPad bag.

Walking around to her nightstand, he sat on the bed, and passed her a goblet.

"The director called," Mike said, which caused Carrie's frown to deepen.

"And you didn't hang up?" Carrie commented.

Mike gave a slight nod. "The Halifax office called to warn me. It's about Mason: he's missing, suspicious circumstances raising a buzz. I spoke with Sam, but all he can gather is inferences to passing information to the Russians."

"That's not the Mason we know," Carrie insisted.

Mike nodded his agreement. “*M*, who, it turns out, is actually *C*, called the director and asked to borrow me. Tony insists on coming along, too. I’ll drive the Solstice to his place, then we’ll continue to the airport in his car. Apparently MI6 has a ticket for an 8:00 PM *British Airways* flight waiting for me at the *BA* desk. Tony’s flexing his considerable diplomatic muscle to get a booking on the same flight.”

“And me?” she asked, making a pout. “Am I stuck here looking after the babies?”

Teila nuzzled against her cheek. *Mew?*

“Well, just one baby,” she amended, “and one big boy, accept that he turns into a big sook whenever you even leave the house.”

Kato flopped between Mike and Carrie, stretching a paw up to Mike’s arm, then let out a mournful yowl.

Mike sighed and petted Kato once more.

“At least the director was agreeable about lending me to MI6 — that’s gotta be a first,” he said, “both for CSIS and, I’m sure, for MI6.”

“Maybe that’s why he was so agreeable,” Carrie suggested. “It’s a major feather in their cap for CSIS to have to lend one of their agents to MI6.”

Mike nodded. “I suppose. The director did say something to that effect. Anyway, I’ll be glad to have Tony along. I expect to feel out of my depth on this one. I got used swinging a katana and killing vampires for a while. Though, there have been smaller missions, like raiding CIA files so our government would know to back away from that terrorist who was trying to hide behind Canadian Citizenship.”

“You’ll do just fine,” she assured him, placing a hand on his shoulder. She then pulled him into her embrace, kissing him hard on the lips.

“Keep your phone charged,” he teased. “I’ll be calling.”

“So, you’re off to play ninja?” Carrie asked.

“I suppose,” he replied, then, “Actually, the original word was *Shinobi*. The term *ninja* didn’t appear until the advent of movies, when some American producer decided *ninja* was easier to pronounce. We’ve been stuck with the term *ninja* ever since.

3: *Flight to London*

Mike set his meagre luggage on the passenger seat of the Pontiac Solstice, started the engine, then pulled out of the yard. As he drove through the dwindling daylight, the uneasy feeling crept back over him, mostly concern for Mason and how the case would play out. He'd left Carrie searching for the cat carrier amid the accumulation of stuff she'd pulled out of the soon-to-be guest room. That prompted a wistful hint of a smile, knowing that she'd eventually find a way to join him. The thought both comforted and troubled him. He didn't like going off without her, and knew deep down that they made a good team, but he instinctively feared for her safety, even after her indispensable assistance in Korea.

After forty-five minutes he exited the highway onto Joseph Howe Drive and worked his way toward the MacKay Bridge over the northern end of the Narrows, then onto the Circumferential Highway. He took the Micmac Mall exit, made his way through the twisting and turning maze of residential streets to Hawthorne, and caught a green light to continue across Prince Albert Road, and pulled into Tony's drive less than a minute later.

Tony glanced up from lowering the trunk lid on his Cadillac, parked to one side of the drive, leaving room for Mike's Solstice. As he pulled up beside Tony, a wan

smile told Mike that his friend was possibly even more concerned than he. Mason and Tony had a history that dated back to the 60s.

“Pull up around the back,” Tony suggested. “It’ll be safe behind the house. We’ll take my car to the airport. Just stow your kit in the boot.”

There was almost an awkwardness to the silence as Tony made his way to Woodland Avenue, which became the highway to the airport.

“I assume you have your Walther,” Tony commented, to which Mike nodded.

“MI6’s Q-Branch would have issued you another,” Tony mused, “but a familiar weapon is better.”

Mike could relate to that. Even with his Zen ability to make anything feel like a natural extension of himself, his stubborn preference of his *Muramasa* katana over any other sword was testimony to how important ingrained familiarity with a weapon could be at a crucial moment.

“Have you spoken to Nigel?” Mike asked.

Tony’s nod was almost imperceptible. “Just before you pulled in. Not much really: Phone LUDs show frequent calls from a *London Daily Examiner* reporter’s private line and home phone — most from her end, only a few originating from Mason, and then only over the last couple of days. Nigel is still trying to get his hands on Mason’s actual phones.”

“Nothing to his cell phone?”

Tony’s frown deepened. “Nigel found something puzzling. Mason’s cell called the reporter’s number a few times, but his last call was to a number in Moscow that looks like it could be an *FSB* number.”

Mike frowned. “*FSB* — Why would Mason be calling Russia’s secret state security police? Aren’t they the new KGB?” He shook his head.

“So the Director actually called you?” Tony asked, his face showing his surprise.

“At least he had the sense to call me on my cellphone, though he did have the Halifax office call ahead on landline.”

This prompted a grin from Tony. “That explains why Carrie almost always answers your home phone. ‘He’s in his dungeon; better try his iPhone’ is what I get from your charming bride whenever I call.”

“There’s a phone on my desk,” Mike shot back, a tad defensive, then, grinning, “though I do check caller ID before deciding whether or not to answer. But, yes, I usually ignore the landline and let the machine take it. I figure anyone with a serious reason to call me has my mobile number.”

“Coming back to Mason,” Tony remarked, “according to Nigel — he hacked into MI6 reports to C — There’s also a file folder missing from Mason’s desk drawer. It’s presumed to be a set of training reports — recertification tests.” Tony paused, his brow still furrowed, then added, “The odd thing about it is that he told his secretary it was there, and asked her to file it first thing in the morning, and to copy it to C before filing it.”

“Why is that odd?” Mike asked, catching himself almost immediately. “He wouldn’t do that if he was about to abscond with the file. She’d miss the file the moment she went looking for it first thing in the morning.” He paused. “You got all this from Nigel?”

Tony nodded. “Our friend might as well be head clerk for MI6 the way he passes straight through their firewalls. Q must be paranoid of him by now.”

Tony parked in the parking garage opposite the terminal, and they walked briskly across the walkway, into the terminal, and walked southwest away from the entrance with its bookstore and newsstands, Tony leading the way straight to the *British Airways* desk.

They spoke to separate clerks, Mike smiling at the way the clerk fell all over Tony — “Of course, Lord

Dewhurst, there was no trouble obtaining executive seating.”

Mike’s ticket was also first class, though he realized it probably had more to do with getting a seat at short notice than any desire on the part of MI6 to cater to him. Once the two clerks realized that Mike and Tony were traveling together, Tony’s clerk took over seat selection and seated them together.

Airborne, Halifax, NS – London, UK

“So, after two years in MI5, what took you back to MI6?” Mike asked. They were an hour into the flight, and Tony was explaining how he met Bruce Mason.

“Simple, really, Michael; The war was taking a turn against us, and *C*, as the head of MI6 was known at the time — *C* for Mansfield Smith-Cumming, the first head of Intelligence back before the First War. Then, after the Kim Philby fiasco, they changed it to *M*, out of some notion of amusement, based on Flemings books. Anyway, *C* wanted someone who could get into Germany and look into the rockets that had started descending upon us — not all the nightly bombs were dropped from aeroplanes. I’d been part of MI5’s *Operation Double-Cross*, feeding misinformation to the Nazis, and had even couriered several dispatches to the other side. So, while the nature of my condition was not known, it was known that I could manage a fair bit of skullduggery in dodgy locations, and make my way back to hearth and home to report about it.

“I met Mason in the fall of 1960. The Russians were experimenting with space rockets — mostly getting our attention with a lot of explosions in the Kazakh area, now called Kazakhstan. My job was to go and see what they were up to, and they gave me this

fresh-faced youngster from Naval Intelligence as a helper for the mission.” Tony grinned. “Gad, he was young — green, the Yanks would have called him — couldn’t have been any more than seventeen or eighteen — at least, that’s what I thought at the time.”

Mike’s smile faded to a frown as he did the math.

“Wait a minute, Tony — I always thought Mason was barely sixty. If he was seventeen in 1960, he’d be nearing seventy by now. How can he still be active in MI6 at that age?”

“Mostly because he’s very good at what he does, but partly because, as you just implied, he looks younger. And, just between you and I, dear boy, he wasn’t seventeen, he was fifteen — lied about his age, joined the navy, then got pushed straight into naval intelligence — his test scores were unparalleled. He was sixty-eight last August — his birthday is six days after yours. Of course, it wasn’t until the mid-sixties, after eliminating a spy uncovered in his section, that they upgraded him to *Double-0* section.”

“Eliminating?” Mike asked.

Tony nodded. “Shot him. The fellow was trying to make a break. He pulled a gun, shot one poor chap just he was drawing his sidearm, then grabbed a young woman as a shield. Mason was just entering. He sized up the situation, made a dive for the fallen agent, snatched up his pistol, and aimed it at the infiltrator. The young lady in question was just tall enough to block the heart shot all agents are trained for, so Mason shot the blighter through the throat, severing the spine — cool as can be through the whole adventure, according to all the witnesses. Amazing for a genius cryptologist — is there such a term as *decryptologist*?

“Even saved my life a time or two over the next few years. Finally, in the spring of ’66, nagged by curiosity about your father, I talked *M*, as we were now calling the director, into lending me to Interpol for a

nasty case that took me to Sydney, where I not only met, but got to work with, your father — that was the time of your unfortunate bicycle accident.”

“How long after that was it before you went over to Interpol permanently?” Mike asked.

“About three years,” Tony replied, a tinge of sadness in his tone. “It was time — too long in one place doesn’t bode well for our kind.” His raised eyebrow, and his pointed glance carried the unspoken warning that, Mike, too, might soon have to make changes.

“Did *M* ever know the truth about you?” Mike asked, then, his memory supplying an echo of Sam Larkin’s comments at Heathrow Airport years before, answered his own question. “Of course he must have. Sam knew about you — he even knew about me when I barely knew myself. I can’t imagine the CIA knowing too much about you that the SIS didn’t.”

“*M* knew — it reached a point that I had to explain the situation. And, Michael, there’s something else you should know...”

“Mason has some of your blood in him, but not enough to turn him,” Mike finished for him. When Tony seemed surprised, Mike made a disparaging grimace. “Come on, Tony — he’s sixty-eight, yet he looks barely early-to-mid-fifties. I assume Mason got seriously wounded during a mission?”

“It was a bullet through the — the large artery that exits the heart, branches upward, then curves downward below the heart —,” Tony paused, clearly waiting for Mike to supply the name.

“The descending aorta,” Mike provided.

“Anyway,” Tony resumed, “the puncture of the aorta was clean, leaving Mason hemorrhaging internally. We were a long way from medical assistance, so I did the only thing I could — I bit into the edge of my palm and made a brief stream of my

blood squirt into the wound. Within seconds he seemed more stable; in a few minutes he could to stand with my assistance.”

“Who shot him?” Mike asked.

“A KGB agent who’d been chasing us.” Tony replied. “A hardliner from their *SMERSH* program, designed to root out and eliminate spies. That would have been spring of 1972.”

Mike came out of reverie — his mind had lapsed into a meditative state — and glanced at Tony, now immersed in the *London Times*. With nothing else to do, he let his mind drift through the cabin, sampling the thoughts of the passengers. The flight was little more than half-full, so there wasn’t much to sample.

Tony gave him a gentle nudge. “That fellow standing at the curtain between first and coach seems unusually interested in us,” he pointed out.

Mike turned his head just enough to register the man in his peripheral vision, then reached out with his mind. “He’s an air marshall. Seems someone told him we’re with Interpol and CSIS.”

“Of course; someone would have to explain why we bypassed security,” Tony commented, nodding.

“I’ll see what he wants.” Mike added, then, catching the marshall’s attention, he gestured to the vacant seat across the aisle, whereupon the man strolled casually forward and sat down.

“I’m Bryan Marshall,” he introduced himself in a British accent, prompting a grin from Mike.

“Is that your real name? Marshall Marshall?” Mike asked, suppressing the urge to chuckle.

Marshall frowned. “So you know I’m an air marshall; and yes, it’s my real name.” His rictus of a smile implied that he’d heard enough jokes on the subject.

"I'm Mike Cameron, and this is Lord Anthony Dewhurst," Mike said by way of introductions. "So what's on your mind?"

"Are either of you armed?"

"Sorry, old boy, but our luggage is *packing heat*, as the Yanks like to phrase it," Tony replied with a smile, leaning forward to speak across in front of Mike.

Marshall hesitated, then explained, "I'm a bit concerned about four passengers: all in coach, not seated together, but evincing awareness of each other; two obviously Arabic, the remaining two not so obvious. In fact, one might even pass for European or American."

"But there's been enough subtle communication among them for you to suspect that they're together, but trying to appear as if they aren't together," Mike suggested, to which Marshall nodded.

"Why don't you head back to your seat. I'll be along in a moment," Mike promised.

"Shall I follow along, just in case?" Tony asked.

"Not sure," Mike mused. *Stay tuned; I'll keep you posted*, he added, communicating telepathically.

Mike got up and strolled casually back to coach, pausing to chat with a female attendant, then continued back to where he spotted Marshall.

"Bryan," he greeted as if they were well-acquainted, then took an empty aisle seat across from him. "Heading home?" he asked. "Why didn't you tell me you were in town? I'm just heading over for a conference, myself."

He then leaned toward Marshall and let him point out the four who worried him. Once Mike had them pinpointed, he went to work, subtly accessing the thoughts of each, which immediately troubled him. They were thinking in Farsi — Mike had a smattering from his Afghanistan mission. Almost immediately, one relocated to sit next to another — the two more

darkly-complexioned, both seemingly older than the other two, about five seats further forward.

These two were now whispering together, becoming increasingly animated, casting glances back at the darker two. When one of the younger, light-complexioned, possibly Arabic, men showed signs of getting up, one of the dark pair signaled for him to remain seated, tapping his watch.

Mike decided not to wait any longer. Focusing on the one who'd just commanded the restless one to stay in his seat, he forced his way into the man's mind, ordering him to remain immobile. Instantly the man went rigid, whereupon Mike did the same with his neighbour. In another moment he had all four incapacitated.

Come on back, Tony, he projected. Dewhurst strolled back less than a minute later, taking the seat in front of him. Mike took a moment to bring him up to speed, then indicating the darker pair, said in his mind, *I'll take the one on the left; you take the other. Meanwhile, Marshall Marshall (he smiled) can watch the other two.*

Getting up, Mike leaned toward Marshall and said, "You were right, but it's all under control. You keep watch on the other two while Tony and I deal with the swarthy pair."

Marshall started to argue and question, but Mike fixed him with a stern look and compelled him to agree. Tony had just taken an empty seat in front of one of the deeply-tanned Arabs when Mike arrived next to him.

Speak to me in English, Mike commanded in Farsi, then forced his way into the man's mind. The Arab, an Irani national, tried to resist, arrogantly assuming that this infidel couldn't possibly hold power over him.

Mike formed the image of fire. The man was about to scream aloud until Mike silenced him, leaving him

screaming in his mind, while his body fought to writhe and squirm, perspiring profusely.

Shaytan awaits you, Mike intoned in the would-be-terrorist's mind. No paradise, no virgins, just eternal fire. Who made you think Mohammed would forgive you for creating even one orphan?

The man responded with a name Mike had heard in a news report. Tony nodded — he'd made a mental note of it.

Describe your plan of attack, Mike commanded.

The man resisted, but Mike forced deeper, squeezed, and made the fires larger and hotter. Almost immediately he got images of four kitbags in overhead compartments. In each was a small, innocuous container of liquid — two with pink liquid labeled as shampoo, two with blue liquid labeled as mouthwash. The man then pictured gathering all four together, giving a pink and a blue to his partner, whereupon each would go at the same time to opposite airplane lavatories. Once mixed into empty water bottles and well-shaken, the combination would explode after ten to fifteen minutes.

Mike checked the seat pocket in front of the man and, sure enough, there was the empty water bottle, given him by an unknowing attendant, completely ignorant of the deadly use to which it would be put. Leaning further in, he located a similar bottle in front of the other man. Invading this man's mind only served to confirm what he'd learned from the first man.

Angry, Mike locked eyes on the second, a Syrian national, treating him to the same mental anguish of fire that had loosened his accomplice's tongue. He left both men frozen rigid, yet trembling and perspiring, as if in the throes of some sort of fit.

Let them sweat it out for a while, he told Tony, not a trace of remorse or pity in his demeanour. The Syrian had a head full of rhetoric about something called

'Islamic State' — another *Al Qaida* wannabe? He shrugged.

Mike walked forward, and paused to examine the minds of the other two conspirators. These two, however, were just unknowing stooges. They were student radicals, possibly doomed to someday escalate into full-fledged terrorists unless someone found a way to defuse the anti-Western rhetoric of which their heads seemed full. The swarthy pair, having contacted them through a fundamentalist blog, had waylaid them in the terminal and given each an innocent-looking bottle to put in their carry-on.

Produce the bottles, Mike commanded.

Wide-eyed, the two complied immediately, placing two bottles of blue 'mouthwash' in Mike's hands.

Harmless, innocent mouthwash, Mike pronounced in their minds. *Mix them together with the two bottles of shampoo carried by your two new acquaintances, wait fifteen minutes, then BOOM! — This plane falls out of the sky in pieces, your mangled bodies falling with the wreckage, heroes to the cause.*

"Who are you?" one of them asked in a whisper, horror blatant in his expression.

"Just a representative of the evil, decadent West," Mike whispered back. "How do you feel about your down-trodden Islamic Extremist Brotherhood now?"

*"F**K That!"* the other blurted.

"I can't help but observe that they didn't even have a completed pair," Tony mused as they made their way back to Marshall.

"I'm not sure what to make of that," Mike replied. "Were they trying to make sure the recruits couldn't steal their thunder or making sure that the components were kept as separate as possible?"

Mike then shrugged, adding, "Either way, it worked out well for the plane, and for the other passengers."

When they reached Marshall, Mike quietly explained what he'd learned, gave Marshall the two blue bottles, then helped him find the pink bottles in the terrorists' carry-on luggage in the overheads.

Marshall looked puzzled as he applied zip-tie restraints to the swarthy pair, eying their ague with suspicion.

"They're contemplating Hell," Mike remarked without further explanation.

"What about the other two?" Marshall asked.

Mike shrugged. "You're the air marshal, but my guess is they might be well on the way to being de-radicalized. Perhaps holding them for lengthy questioning might drive the point home better, but I'd be wary of anything that feeds into the notion of making Western governments look like the bad guys."

Marshall pondered that, then gave an understanding nod. "I suppose I could point out the fine for accepting anything from a stranger into your luggage, then reluctantly agree to wave the fine. Of course they'll spend some time on a few watch lists."

Returning to their seats in Executive, Mike put his head back and let his mind loose to wander until the feel of the plane descending for a landing at Heathrow brought him back to reality.



"C should have a car waiting for us," Tony mused as they were deplaning. Then, as they were approaching the first checkpoint for Customs and Immigration, he added, "I say, old man, now that's a familiar face."

Mike glanced toward the booth and spotted Wentworth Pennington-Smythe, the MI6 analyst that they'd met in 2011 in Bischofshofen, Austria. *Hopefully this is a bit more his speed than playing spy*

amid a coven of vampires, he projected to Tony. The latter just smiled and nodded.

Pennington-Smythe waited until the immigration agent made as if to beckon them from beyond the red line, then flipped open his ID folder and whispered to the officer, who nodded, then beckoned them forward, whereupon Smythe stepped forward.

“Wentworth,” Mike greeted him, then shook his hand.

“*Samurai*, Lord Dewhurst,” Smythe declared in an eager tone, pumping Mike’s hand several times before shaking Tony’s. “I have a car to take you directly to Vauxhall Cross.”

Mike nodded. “The sooner we can get all the facts of the case, the sooner we can begin.”

Damn, he confided to Tony, giving his upper arm a rub, *must he insist on priming the pump with every handshake?*

Tony had to turn his head to hide his broad grin.