

PROLOGUE

Lashio Railhead, Eastern Burma, February 1945

'See ya, mate. For a sheep shagger you aren't too bad.'

The lanky Kiwi flashed back a quick, understanding grin. The Aussie's grudging compliment was about as high as praise ever got between the two nationalities. Even after the past three years of unbelievable hell.

'You too, Jim...for a descendant of a convict whore.'

Where they drew the reserves from only God could know. For both men, and the other two in line beside them, were only piteous creatures resembling men. Hollow cheeked, emaciated, festering with open sores and livid from the incessant beatings.

They were on their knees, hands bound behind them, heads bowed. Waiting.

'Here the bastard comes,' the third in line, the Pom, muttered through sun-drenched, bloated lips. Dozens of flies, heartened by their host's immobility, had settled hungrily on the oozing ulcers on his neck. Flies hardly even registered any more. Without moving his head – to avoid invoking furious reaction from the five guards in front of them – Jim Murphy eyed down the pathetic assembly in the direction he knew Mitani would come. Their fourth in this fatalistic group, a Burmese native, was calmly and softly incanting some ancient appeasement with his gods.

Christ. I wish I had at least that, he thought.

But no, Jim had no truck with religion. His grandfather had left Ireland to get away from it. His no doubt countless, long-forgotten relatives there were probably still fighting over it – on both sides. *Do unto others as...* that was Jim's only credo. And now this incarnation of the Devil was about to do unto them whatever he fucking wanted without any threat of retribution.

Murphy's eyes scanned the now near-deserted camp, his second jungle prison since his unit was captured in Singapore nearly three years ago. Some of the Nips hadn't been all bad he recalled. The first camp, under

that Colonel Ojiwa, had been relatively okay. Food had still been short but with the locals helping out and all the other tricks they survived reasonably. And Ojiwa knew how to maintain the fine line between strength and starvation that extracted the work required of them. Ojiwa's side was winning then.

But now they weren't...and this Mitani bastard was something else.

From the cowered viewpoint, Murphy saw the urgent stride of the Captain's boots come to a position some ten feet in front of the pitiful line-up. It was a swaggering gait, assured, self-important and today steeped with a sense of urgency. With his eyeballs at maximum elevation, Jim could only see up to the short man's thighs. The boots faced away – Mitani would address his own men first.

Three years had given Jim, like most of the prisoners, a smattering of understanding of the language. Mostly short barked commands, for *obedience, activity, punishment*. On rare occasions he had learnt other words from an exchange here or there with a guard, usually one young and frightened like himself – homesick and still part of humanity.

What Mitani had to say today would have nothing to do with human beings.

With an understanding of perhaps two out of every five words and interpolating the gaps, Jim listened with resignation to the harangue. First, the extolling of the warrior's duty to the Emperor, the virtues of death in combat, the divine elevation of those who follow the code of *bushido*. On and on – he'd heard most of it before but never so believing and strident.

Ten minutes passed, with Mitani not once shifting his wide leg stance; only his unseen arms flailed as he stressed further salient points in his exhortation to his men's honour.

Jeez, it's hot! The thought passed through that Jim should maybe just drop to the ground and let the bastards do him in right now. It would save listening to all this shit. The end result would be the same anyhow. But with each temptation he found that an inner surge would come, willing him not to go down before this pig.

If they're gonna chop my head off I won't be lying down...fuck them...fuck them...FUCK THEM!

The tone of the lecture shifted. Mitani was getting down to reality – the now of the situation. Phase two of his carefully structured diatribe. Yes, their forces had headed north-east; a temporary setback before regrouping to wipe out the white and yellow devils. Yes, this small group had been left to clean out this camp. They were honoured men.

Clean out this camp. Holy shit...the main body of Japs had departed yesterday morning with all the able-bodied prisoners – if you can call half-dead able. This little lot remained to clean up alright. All the really

sick and disabled and the comfort women left behind had been shot or bayoneted and buried alive in the haste to cover up. And you fucking volunteered, Mitani – you arsehole!

Mitani moved suddenly, striding forward to confront the far left soldier of his remnants before him. A rapid exchange followed; the speech too fast and overlapped for Murphy to follow.

'Hai!'

Next soldier. Same questions, same answer. *'Hai!'*

Number three must have faltered or had been too hesitant in his reply. Mitani spat off two more deeply searching probes. There was momentary silence; broken by the unmistakable slithering hiss of the *katana* being swiftly drawn and air being sliced.

Followed in the same second by the sounds that ancient steel makes as it cleaves flesh, blood vessel and sinew and ultimately dense bone. The unfortunate's head, eyes wide open in frozen horror, rolled twice over in the fine compound dust even before his body collapsed in the opposite direction.

'Hai!'

'Hai!'

Soldiers four and five would follow *the Way*; true-hearted knights of *Bushido*.

Now came phase three.

Jim had expected the sword but it became apparent that he and his comrades were not deemed worthy of that. They had been captured or surrendered yet had not killed themselves, rendering them lower than could be imagined in their captor's eyes. It was to be the bayonet. The British and Indian forces were advancing from the south-east and the Chinese from the north. Rifle shots could not be risked nor bullets spared.

Oh Jesus! Jim looked sideways at his three hapless companions. Moving and looking up didn't matter now as the four committed soldiers advanced upon them.

The Burmese was first to go, lips still forming obscure, unheard words as the polished blade plunged into his chest centre. Only after it was hastily withdrawn with a twist did the bubbly red froth begin to seep from his mouth and the deeper crimson life force gush from the gaping hole to pool on the dirt where he fell.

Mitani had obviously instructed his men to proceed one, two, three, four; each a few seconds apart in order that his victims could contemplate the death of the man alongside a little before his own demise. A nice touch, designed to show them the error of their Western thought process.

'God Save the King and I love you, Meg,' whispered the Englishman just before the second soldier followed the lead of the first.

Up you, Mitani and *Fuck you, Tojo* came almost simultaneously and loud from the two last – the Australasians – as the flashing spears thrust into their tissue-thin bodies with nil resistance.

Whether it was their concerted curses that upset the intended timing and precision of the strike, or something else Jim Murphy saw in the face of his allotted executioner, he would never know. He felt a warm glow, ethereal...these bastards couldn't kill him. The thrust hurt and at the same time felt quite pleasurable; almost a release from the torment. Certainly no worse than some of the pain he had already endured. His man, number one soldier, looked down on him as he placed his foot on Jim's chest for leverage in extracting the blade. There was no twist; in fact the withdrawing seemed as careful as its initial placement.

When their eyes met, Jim knew that this had been the man's last act of absolution before his own more certain finality. *Bushido*. Despite Mitani, Jim sensed that the soldier, maybe only ten years older than himself, had determined his own time and place with his maker and what sins he would be called to account for.

It took less than a minute for the astute ants to locate their afternoon's harvest. They traversed urgently all over him as he lay there unmoving, one half of his face impressed in the sandy dirt. Never twitching, Jim endured their travel up his nose and everywhere else they cared to search for nutrient. As the blood from his wound began to congeal, it became their epicentre of activity.

Yet through this he kept his one available eye open, like a rolling camera, fixed vacantly upon the brutal practice unfolding before him.

The four remaining guards each stripped down and made ritual preparations for seppuku – *hara-kiri*. Honourable suicide was preferable to capture or defeat by the enemy. Railed incessantly by their warrior-leader Mitani, who strode impatiently up and down the line, they made ready to join their ancestors.

Murphy's linking of the visual input and mental comprehension ebbed and flowed as the physical reality of the damage done to him took its effect. Time had little meaning. Whether it lasted five minutes or five hours he did not know. But what would be indelibly etched in his mind was the slow motion self-slaughter of four human beings. *Bloody hell* – back home he'd been raised on a cattle farm – butchering was part of their means of living. But this was quite different.

He watched motionless yet not uncaring, nauseous but incapable of gagging, as each man slowly, ritually, cut his own guts open. Individually endeavouring to stifle their cries of pain as they squirmed on the blade. With little success; they were mere conscripts...not *Samurai*.

In turn, Mitani stepped up to them and severed their lowered heads from their bodies with one sweeping blow of the sword. Jim's man, number one soldier, he was sure glanced fleetingly in his direction before he had plunged in the short sword to begin his horizontal cut.

Perhaps Jim should have passed out, maybe it was only a dream or nightmare, but his unmoving eye continued transferring its visions to his brain through it all.

With the others dispatched to the afterlife, it was now Mitani's turn. Jim could see that, uncapped, the man was young; about his own age. *How old was that?* Murphy struggled with the poser for a while. Eighteen months of malnutrition and scurvy in this camp had taken their toll on the grey cells. It was...1945. He was...*shit!* More than twenty-one he knew because Red Cross had got parcels through back when he was first in Ojiwa's camp. Letter from his mum, six months old but congratulating him, amongst the tearful prayers for his welfare.

Mitani didn't look much older...a year or two at the most. Maybe twenty-five or twenty-six. He'd never really bothered to notice before – the man's actions had been the point. *How could someone so young do what this prick has done?* The Japanese knelt head-bowed before his consecrated comrades for barely a minute. His shirt was discarded and the katana lay on the ground before him, pointed at his tightly muscled stomach.

Hurry up, you bastard. Do it! Jim shouted in his head, unsure whether he was part of this or watching from some other life. He knew that the blood still seeping from his own body was making him light-headed. *Watch it, don't move. Don't move...don't move.*

Mitani picked up the sword in his left hand and ceremoniously placed the point centrally just under his ribcage. The hilt he lowered and jiggled into the soil until it was firmly wedged. It then just dawned on Murphy that the bugger didn't have anyone to chop *his* head off and he was just going to fall on the damn thing. That wasn't fair.

I'll do it, you arsehole, his mind screamed to his mouth that wouldn't work. He tried to move, to get up and run over and remove this filth from the planet but nothing happened. *The mind is willing but the flesh is weak! Who said that? Come on, you can do it...move! Don't move!* Jim's mind started spinning, weaving in and out of rationality, switching from resolve and purpose to distanced inertia. He felt cheated and deprived, then almost deliriously happy. In the lucid frame he knew he was badly hurt.

Both survivors were absolutely static, poised for the fluid act that would see Mitani thrust forward and downwards on to the finely honed blade. From within his haze Jim could visualize the bloodied steel emerging in his direction through the monster's body...*like Excalibur from the lake.*

Come on, do it!

Suddenly, in one snap action Mitani sprang from knees to feet, the katana raised exultantly to the beating sun. Jim was transfixed by the gleaming image, poised and shimmering as if it was alive. His unmoving eye took in the bloodied silver blade from tip to haft, then the red-black hilt bindings with the gold and pearl inlays and entwined red-black tassels gently swinging despite the arm's rigidity. Involuntarily, his focused lens continued down the near vertical arm to the broad, brown shoulders that gleamed with sweat and he saw the tattoos for the first time. Red and black dragons entwined around a sword, etched into each strong-muscled side; rippling, almost squirming with the intensity from beneath. A deep controlled yet maniacal laugh began to emanate from the short and powerful Asian figure before him. Mitani's free arm rose to join the other as if in tribute to the sky and the katana quivered in the sunlight, defying all. Then, accompanied by spasm-like movements of body and feet, a torrent of shouted utterings spewed forth from the madman as if he were invoking the Devil.

Despite his limited understanding of the Japanese language, Murphy knew that much of what was being vented was in some other tongue. Harsh, guttural, monosyllabic – ancient and pagan-like.

The fierce mantra abruptly stopped. Mitani stood still, his hands and sword still rampant for several seconds. Then he spat out several isolated words, names Jim figured.

'Musashi...Muramasa...Jodan Ju...Mitani. Haaiiii!'

The man lowered his arms, stepped the three paces to his decapitated countrymen, spat once at their headless, distorted torsos, then turned and loped off into the jungle's edge. And Murphy knew then that whatever creed this animal adhered to that disconnected him from the human race was all consuming and very powerful.

You lousy cheating bloody bastard, was his last thought as he lapsed unconscious.

CHAPTER 1

Inland Queensland, Australia 1993

At one thousand feet David Turner lowered the Cessna's landing gear, eased back on the throttle and began his descent toward the distant strip. Strip – *hell* – just a darker red-brown patch on lesser red-brown dirt on a stony, barren plain that once had been a thriving cattle station. El Nino, the drought, the salinity and the economic climate and every bloody thing else had turned this place halfway to a desert.

Jim had almost casually said to drop by when he was next passing through. However it was more than the usual open invitation; there had been a quite noticeable appeal in the asking and Jim Murphy was as independent as they got. That conversation had been two weeks ago. Although it was not really convenient, Turner hadn't seen the crusty old man in eighteen months and, almost ex-uncle-in-law or not, he liked him. Besides, it was only five hundred miles out of his way.

'Hey, Dave, you made it. Good t'see ya.'

'Hello Jim, you old bugger. How are ya? You're looking well.'

'Fair to middling, mate. Y'self?'

'I'm alright. What's up?' Turner took in the wiry frame, the balding grey wisps of hair shaped by years of the wide-brimmed Akubra hat and endless sweat wiping. They said he'd never regained the weight he lost in the war. But looking at the man, carelessly attired only in dirty, knee-length, cut-off khaki shorts and battered sandshoes *sans* socks, David knew that every pound not there was surplus to necessity and what remained was tough as nails.

His skin looked like wrinkled leather – nobody gave a bugger about Factor 15 out here – except for the jagged three-inch scar on his mid-riff that never took a tan. David had enquired about the wound once and once only. Jim had semi-politely told him to mind his own business and that was the end of it.

'Come on up to the house...I'll fill you in.'

As they paced beside each other in the soft red dust toward the once elegant homestead, now well on the neglected course to dilapidation, Turner's mind ticked over on what this could be about.

Jim had lived alone for what, fifteen years, ever since his Sarah had died of breast cancer. He'd carried on, running the cattle, trying to make a go of this God-forsaken north-west Queensland ball-breaker until these last five years had made it impossible. The cattle and the jackaroos had all gone, the cook, everyone. He lived alone on the two hundred square mile property with nothing but his wireless, the mail plane once a month, three dogs and the countless thousands of kangaroos and rabbits putting the finish into the once fertile land. The mail plane didn't have to touch down most times as Jim rarely got mail but the pilot had known him almost forty years and made the stop anyway. A couple of cold beers – stuff the regulations – and a chat covered nicely for the check on Jim's welfare.

Nomadic aborigines called in maybe four times a year, also checking up on Jim, David figured. He'd always been good to them, treating them as equals. When it came to survival out here, they were far superior.

What had he said last time, David asked himself. It had been after more than a few beers a year and a half ago.

I don't owe anybody anything. The bloody bank, the neighbours, the whole bloody world. They can all go to buggery. I'll be right just here – me and me dogs. Stuff the lot of them.

So why had he wanted to see me, David wondered. With Jim, urgent usually meant sometime in the next year or so.

They were seated opposite each other at the long hewn ironbark table in the centre of the large kitchen. Used dishes and dust covered the benches and as David glanced around while waiting for the old man to start he could see that probably only one-eighth of the house got actually used. They were on their fourth can of Fourex and Jim was hedging around what he had to say. It was coming soon, David sensed.

'Now listen to this, mate.' It had begun. 'You're my nephew-in-law or whatever, right?'

David nodded, not risking the flow by reminding the old man that he and Jim's niece had split up. That's why he'd come out to this place last time; to get away from everything.

'Now, you're also the bloody gun geologist, right?' David wouldn't concur with the *gun* part but dipped his head. He was well qualified but it was the experience and practicality that gave him his good reputation.

'You know that lead deposit you found out toward the west boundary last time...'

David nodded again.

'Well, you told me it wasn't viable...not enough yield to warrant

development you said.'

Jim had a cautious look on his face as he said it and David knew he was being tested.

'Sure. The assays didn't add up, Jim. It has to be a pretty rich lode to warrant it these days, with lead being dumped from everything. You know...petrol, paint and so on. When I found it, it looked okay but it's just not enough these days.' They eyed each other off. Jim had something up his sleeve, David knew, because that's the way he did things – never saying more than had to be said but also always having a trump card or exit.

'Well, tell me what you think of this then.' Jim paused for effect and, seeing he had the attention, continued. 'You know I hold the lease on the property next door – for about twenty miles west past my west boundary, right,' he said pointing out the door to the verandah. David nodded, though he could only vaguely remember. 'Christ knows why I ever took it over, plus the option to buy. Things were going a lot better back then, I guess. Well...not that I doubted your assessment, I went out that way, past where you went, fossicking around, you know...'

David nodded...*please continue.*

'I followed the line of the ridges you'd identified, kept going a fair way. Things seemed to change a bit. I dunno...the area seemed different, less disturbed or something. Anyway, I picked up a few rocks, hacked here and there and filled up a haversack full.'

Murphy paused to swig on his beer, eyes levelled at Turner to show he was serious.

'So, being curious to see what was in 'em, I gave them to a gem fossicker bloke I know to take to the big smoke.'

Brisbane, David presumed – some thousand miles away.

'Didn't want to bother you. Besides, you were overseas somewhere.'

Yeah, David recalled – Asia, working, and trying to forget or come to terms with the bust up with Julie.

'Anyway, my mate took them to this assay crowd, a branch of some French mob. I didn't hear anything for about four weeks, then out of the blue in drops this bloody executive type prop-jet with these three swanky guys on board. Dressed for the bush they were...safari suits and all. Ha!'

David grinned – Jim had no reverence at all for image and general citification – and the two resumed sipping their warming beers. The discourse had slowed the pace of the imbibing.

'The head honcho, this Frenchie, was all over me. *The great potential, the opportunity*, and all this crap.' Jim's arms were waving in mimicry.

Turner had taken real interest now. 'When was this?'

'About six months ago. Tried to call you but you were away. Anyhow, knowing what you'd said, I said to this bloke what d'ya mean. The yield's

no good.' Murphy looked up at David expectantly, like a child hoping he'd said the right thing. Turner waved his hand, intrigue rising.

'So then this Frog really went to town. *No, no, NO...*and stuff,' Murphy gesticulated like the Frenchman was a pansy. 'They had a new technology now that would make it three times more viable. Some bacterial leaching process that extracted the lead as cheap as buggery. Anyway I said it all sounded too much for me and said that I'd talk with this gun geologist I knew.' Murphy winked then carried on.

'*No, no, no*, the Frenchie said. *This is very real – at the forefront of technology. No one knows about it yet.* Then the guy pulls out a bloody bank cheque for half a million bucks and stuck it out at me.'

'Jesus!' David exhaled. If he'd expected anything of Jim's little saga it wasn't this. '*And...*?' was all he could say.

'Okay, I looked at the thing, his cheque, and it was already made out to me and it looked bloody real so I said to this bloke *what for?* I'd figured they wanted to buy the lease outright, you know, they'd found something we hadn't so were trying to get in cheap and make a killing on whatever it was they'd assayed. So I hedged a bit...' Jim paused.

'That'd be right,' David said, with a grin, but noticed Murphy didn't respond. He was serious.

'The *half a mill*, Dave, was only their offer to *lease* the bloody area for a *year*. They wanted to use it for trials of their new process and if it all worked out they'd be prepared to negotiate a full sale. *Plus* royalties and so on. What d'ya think of that?'

Turner's mind spun. Sure, he'd heard about the bacterial leaching technology and it sounded pretty good. But even for it to be viable at current prices, the lead percentage would still have to be way above the yield that he'd established on the deposits on the main property. Maybe the mother load was further out, on the lease as Jim had described. But the outright tender of that much money – pre-prepared as an inducement to agreement – smacked of something unusual.

'Jim...these French guys. Were they acting for themselves or someone else? Some other group?'

'Yeah. They were agents for this Jap company...Tanada Industries. It was Tanada's technology and cheque, but they had total authority to negotiate and finalize the business. So they said.' Jim Murphy now looked a little sheepish, as if anticipating some admonishment from the younger man. 'Look, Dave – I know I'm out here and my newspapers are usually a long way out of date but I do read them. Tanada is one of the biggest industrial-chemical companies going.'

Dave nodded very slowly. Tanada Industries...they were a massive conglomerate. As an independent consultant he'd done some work for a mining company dealing with them a few years back. And Tanada had

been tough to negotiate with. Nothing was left to chance or up in the air. Not like this arrangement. After thinking for a minute he asked.

'So, what'd you do? Take the money?'

'Bloody oath I did. It's still sitting in the bank 'cause I can't think of much to do with it yet. Heh...funny isn't it? Here I've been watching this place go down the gurgler for years and now I've got enough dough to do something about it I can't be bloody bothered. I'm kinda growing to like it like this.' The words were said hesitantly, seeking approval as Murphy swept his arm, gesturing at his world out there.

It would take ten times the dollars to do what had to be done Dave figured, and the old man knew it.

'Well, I know who to come to for a loan, don't I?' he said with a quick grin, then began more seriously. Something did not add up. 'This was six months ago. What's happened since?'

Murphy took his time in formulating his answers, getting the order of events right. While thinking he stood up and extracted two more cans of beer from the gas fridge. There was no mains electricity this far inland, just a little from the windmills and fossil-fuelled generator.

'Thirsty work all this talking,' he said as he placed one can in front of David and opened both ring pulls simultaneously with his two strong index fingers.

'Ambidextrous. Anyway...' he began as he sat down. 'You know there's a sort of plateau out there – on the lease. This flat top on the ridge.'

David didn't, but nodded his head to maintain Jim's flow.

'Now, you can't see it from here – it's about seven miles on past my west boundary. But about three weeks after the deal, I was over that way checking the 'roo fence – why I bloody bother any more I'm stuffed if I know. I camped the night out there, figuring to finish fixing a big gap the next day. That's when they started coming in. You'd think the bloody army had arrived on exercise. Big choppers with bugger-all lights coming and going all night, carrying in who knows what. I guessed they were trucking stuff to Mount Isa and then flying it here 'cause the roads aren't that crash hot.'

Barely passable in the dry, David mused. Non-existent in the wet season. But why were they transporting only at night, without full lights. He flew the things...why make the task more bloody difficult.

Jim paused to sip at his beer. 'Okay. Now...I'm not usually a nosey bugger, and one of the terms of the deal was that I wasn't supposed to go onto the lease or tell anyone about it. But in the morning I thought I'd just go a bit closer to have a bo-peep at what was going on. Anyway...I only got about a mile in and this small chopper comes straight out of the blue and sits down in front of my truck.' Jim shifted a little, licked his lips and

eyed David to see if he still had his interest. Turner was leaning forward on the table, listening intently.

'So, this guy gets out and comes over to me. He was...well, ahh...Asian looking. I say *looking* because he had sort've slanty eyes and the straight black hair but his skin was quite fair and he had to be over six foot tall. Powerful looking bloke – about in his mid-twenties I'd say. Eurasians, they call them, don't they?'

David nodded. Interesting so far but where was Jim heading?

'This bloke was real polite; spoke with a little bit of a Yank twang. Introduced himself as Jimmy Shan...the mine manager for Tanada. We had a bit of a general chitchat before he very subtly reminded me of the agreement. He stressed that when everything was up and running in a few months he'd personally pick me up in the chopper and show me over the plant. But for now, he said their patents and stuff weren't in place and they couldn't risk any leak of how their process worked. They had millions tied up in it – even this pilot plant was costing them some seven million.'

Not that much in the mining game, David thought, but if the lead yields weren't at least three or four times better than the assays on Jim's land something was way amiss in the equation.

'Anyway, I just shrugged, said it was okay and made to leave. This Jimmy said it had been good to meet me – as I said, *polite* – and David...' Jim looked squarely at the younger man as if to convince him he wasn't crazy, '...this guy flashed me a big warm smile as he held out his hand but his eyes...jeez, his eyes. They were the deepest, coldest bloody eyes I'd ever seen. Well, only the second lot that cold but that's another story. And Dave – his little finger on the left hand was missing down to the second knuckle.'

As he halted, Jim looked away. Had all the years out here on his own made him a bit crazy; would David think he was off his rocker. Then, looking back up, he said, 'Dave, this bugger made me shiver inside. And it was a hundred and ten in the shade out there. I *felt* evil, *smelt* it; something I've never experienced since...' he trailed off. Then, with eyebrows raised, asked, 'You think I'm bloody mad?'

'No,' Turner replied quickly. Jim was saner than anyone he knew. 'If you felt it, it was probably real.' He'd learnt that himself in Vietnam. 'What happened next?'

'I just high-tailed it back home and haven't been back since. Over five months. Oh, that's right, another thing about that bloke. He was wearing a long-sleeved shirt, in that goddam heat. Strange. I'd thought about it later then remembered that as he stretched out his arm to shake hands I saw these swirly, multi-coloured tattoos just below his cuff.'

David tensed and straightened in his chair, deep in thought.

Jim rose from the table, slipping on a stained rumpled flannelette shirt

as he padded over to the fridge once more. Returning, he gestured with a can for David to follow out on the wide hardwood verandah.

Noting the old man's token concession to the rapidly dropping mercury, Turner shrugged his jacket on over his t-shirt. Jim's tolerance of the extremes was legendary.

Slumped back in the ancient squatters chairs, the two men silently mulled their own thoughts while vacantly absorbing the splendour of the orange fireball sinking behind the western ridge. Winter blackness descended quickly in this part of the world. As did temperature, albeit relatively less than in the more elevated inland regions.

The nightlife began its cacophony of chirps and squawks and myriad calls as the evening forage began. What the creatures subsisted on used to mystify David, until many years in outback exploration had educated him in the reality of the food chain.

He heard the generator in the back shed start up and settle into its low hum as it downloaded charge into the batteries that would power the lights later. But for now Jim would not switch any on. David knew that while the old man reckoned it only attracted the bugs, he really liked it like this. Alone, at one with the dark and all the creatures out beyond.

Glancing over, he watched as Jim methodically rolled another thin cigarette, lit it with both hands cupped about the match from years of habit despite the breathless night, patted one of the dogs on its rump, then leant back contentedly.

One day I'll ask him again, David thought. *What happened back then in the war that had so shaped his character.*

'Dave,' came out of the near darkness. 'What d'you think...about what I told you earlier?'

'Still thinking about it, mate. It seems strange. The guy you described sounds kind of young for a mine manager and the assay side of things has got me stuffed. Unless they've found some really heavy concentration over on the lease. Unlikely though!'

'Yeah. That's my thinking too. But I've got half-a-million bucks for doing bloody nothing. I'll tell you about that.' He paused, framing what he had to say.

David knew there had been more to tell but, as always, he had waited until Jim was ready.

'Y'know, Dave, I implied before that I jumped at the money. Well, I didn't really. Thought long and hard about it for nearly a week.'

As always, Turner concurred.

'Tanada Industries – Japanese right? Well...as you know, not that you know much 'cause I've never told anyone what happened back then, what...over fifty years ago. I was a POW...three years with the mongrels in Burma. Hated their guts for bloody years and years afterwards. Then,

over the past maybe twenty years or so, and especially since the wife died, I've sorta mellowed. Guess I've kind of seen the human race for what it is. We fought that bloody war just as my old man fought his and so on. Nothing's ever changed – we've been fighting bloody wars since time began. Look what's happening around the world right now; little wars all over the place. The Iraq thing, bloody Africa, Yugoslavia.' Pausing for a haul on the cigarette and quick toss of beer, Jim Murphy was deciding on how and how much to say about himself and his innermost feelings established by a hard life.

'Not all of them were bastards, Dave. Some were okay – some of the Japs. Poor young buggers just doing what they were told like us. One in particular...' He hesitated, remembering. 'He saved my life. I should have been dead. Then again, his bloody commander was the vilest excuse for a human being you'd ever be likely to meet.' He ceased abruptly, inhaling on the smoke. No, not that. He could never relate that. After reflection and adjustment he continued.

'Now, what I'm saying is this. I reckon that most people, like as a race, aren't inherently bad. It's only individuals – ruthless power-hungry pricks that use their fellow countrymen as pawns – that cause the real damage. Now...ahh...I had to really battle with this one. Selling out the farm as they say...to the *bloody Japs*. But hell, I'm way over seventy now. No dough to fix this joint up, no incentive to do it. The cattle industry is stuffed, like most of the other rural industries. The place is probably not even saleable fixed up or not.'

Jim paused, waiting for any comment from David. There was none. 'So I had to say to myself – and these dogs here copped a lot of it – what is the point of me hanging on waiting for God knows what. To just keel over one day and that's it. No, I figured if I took the dough I'd maybe be able to do something useful with it. And also, maybe the Tanada mob would get something going out here, y'know, create some jobs. Better than bloody nothing, isn't it?'

It made sense to David, but then he could also understand the man's struggle within. Not totally of course – how could one man feel another's anguish. Imagine yes, but not really feel.

'If you're comfortable now with it, Jim, then you've done the right thing. Anyway, you haven't sold it to them, have you? It's just a trial plant on the lease. And you've still got this place.'

Murphy sighed deeply. 'Yeah. But I'm not all that comfortable about it now, Dave. That's the worry. Y'know I thought – clever bastard me – that I had the trump hand in this. It was only a lease to them for one year. Terms and conditions for a full sale to be negotiated after that, subject to their success and this and that. I could just bail out of it then if I wanted. Five

hundred grand for a year...easy money.'

'Well, what's bothering you then?'

Murphy held back for a moment. 'The *agreement*, Dave. I realize now that it was just too bloody sweet and simple. It's all loaded my way and open-ended. Does that sound like the Japs' way of doing business to you?'

It certainly didn't. Turner had been involved in dozens of negotiations over mining leases with the Japanese, especially on coal deals. Yields, quantities, delivery dates, escalation factors, currency fluctuations, out-clauses, contingency items – all meticulously negotiated and hammered out to the last detail. And almost always slanted in favour of the Japanese company on a take-it or leave-it basis.

'It's not usual, Jim but hell...you've got the money so what's there to worry about?'

'Something's going on out there. I can feel it and I don't like it. Look, when I rang you from town that couple of weeks ago, I wanted to talk to you about this. But what I had in mind then was that if these guys could make a successful mine out of the lead on the lease property, then maybe you could see a way to putting the same technology to work on this property. I mean...if the yields are the same. That's what I first wanted to put to you. But now...y'know, after thinking things through, waiting for you to get here, I just don't know. My head's churning. *And* I keep thinking about that white-skinned Asian. He gives me the creeps.'

David remained silent. The situation was perturbing and he needed time to give a considered opinion. As a geologist, things did not add up. Rocks either did or did not contain certain elements. Conclusions on a possible oil field or mineral deposit were never pre-empted by wishful thinking, except by the fly-by-night shonky speculators. Only detailed exhaustive analysis provided the truth.

'Jim, what say we do a fly-over in the morning?'

David had the plane at two thousand feet, banked slightly to port and fixed on autopilot. It was mid-morning and the sun was glaring in from starboard. Jim had insisted that they only did one pass – for discretion – and far enough away to be reasonably deemed passers-by. They were to disappear over the ground horizon and return to the homestead the long way round.

Each man held one of David's high-powered Zeiss binoculars pressed against the perspex windows as they peered down at the plateau. Jim was in the seat behind David, muttering and cursing as he fiddled with the new-fangled auto-zoom and digital read-out controls. Bearing, distance, focus hold – half a dozen simultaneous read-outs flashed in front of his eyes and he wished he'd brought his old Leicas. But when the lens snapped

onto the right combination, more by chance than understanding, Jim understood just how good these things were. He felt like a spy satellite.

The pre-fabricated huts, the three hundred foot long open-cut pit, the strange looking fifty foot high round steel tower and the ant-like men scurrying about with urgency all became crystal clear. 'Bloody hell,' he exhaled, glancing sideways at Turner who he noticed had put his binoculars aside and was busily operating the plane's under-side camera. Normally it was aimed at land formations – now it was trained on the Tanada plateau site.

'Well, what d'ya think?' Murphy was peering behind the geologist, trying to get a look at the photographs drying on the bench. Turner carried all the gear with him in his plane. It was like a mobile laboratory, as it had to be, with satellite phone, fax, and ore-testing equipment. He could run his business from anywhere on the continent from that plane, and have his information sent anywhere in the world within minutes.

David waited patiently as the developers fixed; studied them for perhaps thirty seconds, then turned around to confront the eager old man.

'I'm not sure, Jim. I don't know that much about this new bacterial leaching stuff. Chemical leaching sure. But look...see the tower. You saw that today didn't you?'

'Yeah...clear as a bell. What's it do?'

'That's my problem; I don't know. It doesn't seem to fit in with what I've read about the process.'

They were silent for a moment. 'Any ideas?' Jim asked.

'Maybe – but I don't like them. Have you still got some of those samples you took from the plateau area?'

The old man stroked his wispy head a couple of times, thinking hard. 'Yeah. Yeah...out in the shed. I only gave my mate about half. You want them?'

A tense hour passed as David performed his assay. Jim shuffled about, made them a sandwich, went out to feed his chooks and forced himself to keep his mouth shut to allow David to do his work.

'*Bloody dogs*,' he cursed as the three mongrels suddenly started barking and scurrying about the yard parameters. Then the fowls started up. One loud shout shut them all up; sometimes this happened out here. Maybe dingoes were prowling; maybe the Abo's were coming back in. Even Jim couldn't always know. Still, for now they had gone into a restless quiet. When he re-entered the kitchen, Jim found Turner sitting ashen-faced in front of his equipment on the table. Rock samples were strewn all over the floor.

'Jeez, what's up?'

David turned on him angrily, looking deeply into the veteran's face, then softened. It wasn't the old bugger's fault.

'Jim,' he started slowly, trying to form what he had to convey in non-technical language and as gently as possible. 'Jim...I'll tell you what's happening.' He held off to take stock of his uncle-in-law, wondering how he'd take it. Seeing the realization in the other's face that something was very wrong, David thought a few seconds before continuing. 'Do you know what *lead* is?'

Jim's look of worry transformed into one of perplexity. 'Course I do. It's bloody heavy. You make fishing sinkers out of it, batteries; X-ray bloody machines use it. Like you said earlier, they used to stick it in paint and petrol and stuff. So what!'

'Lead, mate, is the end product of even heavier elements. Thorium, Actinium, Uranium. They break down over thousands of years, releasing their natural radioactivity until they end up an isotope – all chemically identical to lead. Non-radioactive, stable, but still very toxic *lead*.'

Murphy lowered his head abruptly. He knew what David was about to say would be damn serious.

'Jim, the Tanada Corporation isn't trialling some new lead extraction process. They're pulling out *fucking high-grade uranium!*'

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than an instinctive chill made the hair on his neck stand on end. Turner swivelled around, only to experience the broad fleeting smile and deadly black eyes that Jim had described. Six-foot plus tall, handsome white-skinned Asian features, with his long black hair tied back. The *Eurasian* – with four others, all much smaller and darker. In the kitchen with them, Uzi machine pistols hanging on thin leather straps from their shoulders.

By the nonchalant ease with which these men carried their weapons, David knew that they were experienced. One stood immediately in front of Jim's gun rack, his wide flat face passive, not even daring them to have a go. These men understood – as did he and Jim – that the situation was totally under their control.

'So...Mr Jim Murphy and now Mr David Turner,' the Eurasian said calmly with a hint of an American accent. He was looking inquisitively as he spoke but raised his hand to silence David before his question could emerge. 'Your plane's registration number, Mr Turner, has given me your name. That you have analysed these rocks,' he said, sweeping one arm at the mess on the table and floor, '–confirms that you are the geologist who owns the plane.' There was no hint of smart-arse in the delivery, mere matter-of-fact statement.

'I am very pleased that you have not radioed or faxed anyone about our little operation on the plateau. Yes...' he paused as he saw David's eyes

widen, '...we have very sophisticated monitoring equipment at the mine. We locked on and photographed your discreet flyover then tracked you back here. Had you endeavoured to communicate with anyone you would not be sitting there now. A surface-to-air missile was trained on you all the time. Now...' Jimmy Shan paused, smiling, allowing the impact of their haplessness to sink in. 'Enough talk. Our operation is near an end and we have little time. You shall be coming with us. I am sorry for the inconvenience.'

As he swept his left arm towards the door, the Eurasian's sleeve pulled up just enough for Turner to see the ornate colourings starting just above the wrist. And two-thirds of the little finger was missing, as Jim had described.

David knew Asia and the prospects of this arcane scenario were all but incomprehensible. What in hell was Tanada Industries, the well-respected international industrial behemoth, doing here operating so covertly in Australia? And *how* could it be that the operation was being controlled by a mid-ranked member of the Japanese Mafia – the *Yakuza*?

CHAPTER 2

Each man sat on the floor in a pool of his own depleting sweat, leaning against the bare white walls of the ten by eight prefab. The only air came from a small perspex roof vent. The wall opening once filled with a small air-conditioning unit had been sealed outside with plywood. It was hot, and rising with the mid-afternoon sun.

They had been marched from the homestead to the Asians six-wheel-drive troop carrier parked in scrubby bush about a mile from the house.

As they'd been told to – politely but menacingly – they had remained silent. Until Jim had sighted the bloodied bodies of his three dogs and began to scream 'You fucking bast...!' and had been savagely clubbed from behind with a machine-pistol butt. He'd had to be supported by David the rest of the way.

David looked over at the old man now. *Christ, that had been a solid blow.* 'You okay, Jim?'

Murphy turned his head David's way and he looked pitiful. Dark blood matted the sparse grey hair on the nape of his neck. 'Been better, mate. I'll be right.'

Tough old bugger, David thought.

'Jeez, David, mate. I'm sorry.' The voice was cracked with remorse.

'Not your fault, Jim. Those bastards got the drop on us well and truly. Whatever they're up to they're bloody serious.'

Murphy nodded glumly and stared at his gnarled dirty feet. 'What'd'ya think they're doing?' he mumbled.

Turner had been pondering on that for all of the past two hours they'd been locked in the makeshift prison. 'I can't figure it out, Jim. Tanada Industries is giant. They run their own nuclear power plants in Japan. They can get uranium legitimately – Australia sells them the yellowcake. So why this sneaky bloody operation? It's got me stuffed!'

The old man shuffled his hand into the deep pocket of his baggy shorts to find his tobacco then withdrew it, thinking better of smoking in the clammy space and then also remembering that they'd taken his matches.

Their banter was suddenly cut short by the sounds of feverish activity. Sharp barked commands came from outside and the noises of machinery in action – trucks and forklifts hustling about urgently.

In turn, these were increasingly drowned out by an approaching *whump, whump, whump* that reached an ear-piercing crescendo within their enclosed space, which also began to vibrate alarmingly.

'Chinooks,' David stated with certainty. 'Three of them.' The ominous or life-saving sound – depending on whose side you were on in Vietnam – remained etched in his mind. As the huge helicopters landed close by and reduced their rotors' speed and pitch, some of the dust that swirled about them came filtering down their tiny roof vent.

The two Australians listened anxiously to the staccato spitting of instruction and renewed action, trying to glean what was going on. David understood a smattering of Japanese, learnt in a crash course before a business trip and subsequent visits. But with the overriding noise he could not make sense of enough of what he caught. And there was a second unknown language also involved. The flurry lasted for perhaps an hour. Then came silence, but for the steady vibrating pulse of the idling propellers.

Both men startled when there was a loud thump on the side of the hut, followed shortly by the sound of footsteps on the roof. A shadow descended over the Perspex vent, cutting what little light permeated. Then the smooth polite voice of the Eurasian, Jimmy Shan, came directed down the opening.

'Once again, I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you, gentlemen. We're leaving now. The forecast is for twenty-nine degrees tomorrow – roughly eighty-five Fahrenheit. By my calculations the temperature in there should reach over one hundred and twenty by eleven a.m. Your air should expire just after twelve. *Sayonara!*'

The vent snapped down and they heard the speedy insertion of four self-tapping screws through the dome's sides and flashing upstands. They were sealed in their now gloomy tomb, which vibrated strongly as the powerful rotors accelerated to lift-off speed.

With nightfall the temperature eased, providing significant relief. However the air was already becoming dank and stale and it passed through both men's minds just how bad it would be if one of them had to defecate. They had established that by pissing against the wall in one particular corner, with the slight fall that way at least their urine pooled there only and slowly dribbled away through a slight crack between the wall and floor sheets. Not that they had much of anything left to pass, having neither eaten nor had liquid since mid-morning.

It was black inside the hut, with the faint starlight giving the small opaque roof dome a slight distinction. Turner massaged the knuckles of his right hand. They were raw and bruised from having just pounded at that little piece of acrylic, less in desperation for fresh air at that time than out of frustration. The sealed air-conditioner opening had been as unyielding. They were going to die in this little hut tomorrow. Hundreds of miles from anyone or anywhere and no one would ever know why.

He was a big man, not so tall as broad and, at forty-eight, still quite powerful. He kept reasonably in shape and the physical side of the geology – being out there tramping and fossicking – kept him fit. Before his attempts at the roof vent he had put his shoulders to the one door, although knowing the impossibility even beforehand. He'd seen the keyed deadlock and additional barrel bolts when they were crudely thrust inside.

'Dave.' The quiet voice came through the black from the opposite side.

'Yes, mate.' Jim hadn't said that much during Turner's violent attempts for freedom. He'd just watched and waited, already knowing that even their combined weight and effort would have no better effect.

'You have to be just still. Shallow your breathing. Try and preserve the oxygen.'

Turner slumped. He knew the old bugger was right but hell, they couldn't just lie here and wait to suffocate within the next eighteen hours.

'I know, Jim...but *shit!*' was all he could say.

Another ten minutes passed, each consciously endeavouring to use as little of the precious air as possible, before the old man spoke again.

'Look, David. This is my bloody fault we're in this mess. It *is* – don't say anything otherwise.' Murphy paused and on getting no reaction began to talk; oxygen depletion or not. 'I've done this before, Dave. I survived then and we'll do it this time.'

Turner sighed. 'This is different, mate. You heard the choppers take off. There's no bastard within hundreds of miles of us. What was your thing...*punishment*? The Japs let you out after cooking you for a few hours in one of their bloody corrugated iron ovens?' He'd said the last part angrily, insensitively, and hadn't meant to. The heat, the air, the sense of futility had got to him. 'Sorry...didn't mean that.'

'It's okay,' Murphy responded softly, then went reflective. 'Three days. Three whole days they had me in one of their bloody ovens,' he stated unemotionally.

'You don't have to, Jim. Just because we're here now you don't have to let all that out.'

'Nah, it's alright. Dunno why I've kept it bottled up so long – never wanted anyone to know just how bad some human beings can treat others, I guess. Swept it under the carpet sort of. You wanta listen.'

David nodded in the dark as if the old man could see him then grunted

in assent.

'Before all that though, Dave, I want to tell you something else.' He halted to get it right then continued. 'Those buggers who grabbed us – apart from that Jimmy Shan bastard – and the ones who were all over this camp. They aren't bloody Japs, mate.'

David, too, had had an uneasy feeling about that but had been unable to pinpoint the difference. And the language they had used was sometimes Japanese then equally often some other tongue. Asian for sure, but not always Japanese.

'I had three years with the Japs. I got to know their looks and their way of speaking and all that. These bastards weren't Japs. Dave, tell you how I know, okay?'

Turner lay flat on his back on the rigid plywood floor. The old man was sleeping but he could not. What he had been told went around and around cascading in his head. Their current predicament had paled to some background storage place in his mind.

Three years of near relentless horror, culminating in the vicious suicide ritual Jim had described. Watched and recorded one-eyed as he lay bleeding toward death in the dust, with ants running urgently in and out of his orifices. And the vivid description of the Captain Mitani with his shimmering red-black hilted *katana* and the sweat-covered tattoos of the red and black dragons on his shoulder muscles. *Jesus. No wonder he preferred it out here – no people.*

David had witnessed plenty of action and atrocity from both sides in Vietnam and in the highlands of Laos and Cambodia. Maybe it had been no better or worse than what Jim had experienced. But then, David had never been captured.

He had a capacity to stay up late, often willing himself to stay awake through the night to complete a project. Yet now, after absorbing Jim Murphy's story, he realised that he had to effect the reverse. Sleep was imperative for oxygen preservation and for strength. For in the morning he was somehow going to get them out of their sweatbox coffin. He would not let the old man experience that hell again.

'Jim, Jim.' The diffused glow from the roof-dome and muted sounds of the birds that had evolved to somehow live in this near desert told David that it was dawn. And the temperature in the hut was already rising. 'Jim,' he called from his prone position. There was no response so David painfully raised himself, twisting his torso to rack the aches from his body after the night on the hard ply floor and went over on his knees to the old man.

Hell, Jim was always up and pottering around before the dawn and

David had never seen a clock in the farmhouse. He shook him gently. A little harder. Then turned the grey head toward himself with his hand.

As he saw it, a low moan began to emanate from somewhere well below his lungs and traversed through his frame to emerge as a violent guttural scream. 'Nooooooooo!'

Jim's nostrils were wadded tight with entwined tobacco and cigarette papers. His mouth was stuffed half-open, crammed with the balance of the weed he smoked and packed and sealed in hard with the soft leather pouch it was kept in.

His eyes were closed and the tough skinny body in the daggy shorts looked at peace. Yet David tore at the foul stuffing with his fingers, ripping it out and hurling it to either side in a desperate search for life.

His mouth sought Jim's and the old man's nose and he blew in both and pushed with both palms on the chest. And blew and pushed and blew and pushed until he was totally exhausted and also finally understood the fact that Jim had been quite dead for several hours. Probably within minutes of David's falling asleep.

Turner knew he had been crying despite the lack of tears. He had no spare liquid left in his body. Five hours had passed since his discovery and he reckoned it was near noon and one hundred and twenty-five degrees plus in the hut. Stripped to his underpants he stared absently at the rigid scrawny figure only some eight feet from him. The deprivation of moisture and nutrient was beginning to have effect on his faculties.

'You cunning old bastard,' he muttered. 'You've been through this before. We can make it.'

His thoughts swirled about-face and the reality again surged to the fore. This man, first just an uncle of his wife, then solid friend for nearly twenty years, had given up his share of their available oxygen. So that David could live that much longer.

'Oh, Jesus...Jim...Jim...'

The heat in the airless prefab was building up relentlessly. David was needing to breathe with long deep sucks to extract maximum oxygen – like the dedicated smoker on low-tars for the first time. Whatever ambition he had last night for escape was gradually eroding. His emotions were two elevators passing – hope going down, despair up.

Finally, accepting the mantle of the condemned man, he found his rambling thoughts focusing on one thing – his family. Julie; God she was a great woman. Why...why hadn't he stuck it out? It was his fault, wasn't it?

And the kids. Steven was what...fourteen now. Little Susan...ten...no, eleven. Why hadn't he made the effort to see them more often? They still loved him. They told him so, begged him to come back earlier on...come

back...come back. Sorry kids...sorry kids...sorry...

He was barely conscious now. The slow baking and deprivation of air made his head pulse. It seemed to be quite independent of the body that had no feeling at all. He was just a head, floating in some ether; maybe this was death. He didn't know and didn't care. It felt okay.

Now the final phase was setting in. His mind began hallucinating. He was hearing noises outside, a rattling of the bolts and locks on the door. Then distorted incomprehensible utterings, aural mirages. Shut up...shut up...go away.

No. Some deeply recessed store of reason told him it was real. Like the emergency batteries that provided temporary light when the mains went out, it told him.

He tried to form a word or sound, anything, but could not connect the appropriate functions for speech. In desperation Turner summonsed his body's last reserves into his right arm and flung it sideways to smash against the wall. His last conscious act before he pitched forward into oblivion.

He didn't hear the violent wrenching as timber was rent away from aluminium cladding or see the flat black face with its two rheumy red eyes opened wide peering in through the former air-conditioner opening. Nor did he hear or feel the frenzied axe demolition of the aluminium and timber door.

'No, mate. Just a little sip. Bit at a time, eh?'

Turner felt the sweet liquid being trickled between his lips then every inch of its downward passage into his core. Then its life-giving force slowly percolating outwards to his extremities. A gentle arm restrained his own, preventing his sudden urge to seize and devour all of this fluid, this beautiful nectar.

'You're in bad shape, fella. But you'll live, no worries. Seen worse.'

David's eyelids flickered open, then shut rapidly against the glare. After several adjusting attempts, he managed to hold them ajar and found himself looking at one of the blackest, most weather-beaten faces he had ever encountered. The nose was broad and flat, the eyes tracked with red from the years of sunshine and dust, the hair and beard merged into one grey and black unruly mass. He tried to mouth *thanks* but was cautioned not to by the wave of a stubby charcoal finger.

'You just rest. That's what you need, mate. Here, another sip.'

It took nearly two hours of the cautious treatment before David had regained sufficient strength to sit up and take stock of his surroundings. He had been laid on a blanket in the shade thrown by his prison. His saviour was squatting further along; patiently blowing at glowing embers

as he added first twigs then larger pieces of wood to the fledgling fire. Seeing David rise, the bushman grinned.

'Grub'll be along soon. Feeling hungry, mate?'

Ten minutes later a band of Aborigines shuffled into view and came towards them. An older woman with bared heavy breasts and a gait that conveyed the burden of the nomadic life. Beside her strode a younger man, perhaps early thirties, and two boys, about ten David guessed. All had no more than a loincloth on and toted spears. As they reached the fire, each deposited their catch in front of the older man for inspection. David could see the excitement and proud animated gestures given by the boys as they related their prowess in spearing the goanna and finding the grubs and plant roots all by themselves. Grandma and pa, son and grandsons, David guessed correctly. Learning the old ways.

The patriarch approached him and held out his hand. 'Jandowuy Yunupingu...Jackie for short.'

'Dave Turner, Jackie. I'll stick to that if you don't mind.' They smiled warmly at each other.

'Thanks. For finding me. I thought I was gone.'

'Would've been, for sure. 'Nother hour I'd reckon. Our old mate's dead – you know that?' While stated plainly, David detected respect in the old man's voice. His eyes clouded as he glumly nodded.

'You obviously knew him, Jackie.'

'Yeah. Beaut bloke. Worked the stock for him for years – back when the station was a goer. You a friend of his?'

'We were related, by marriage. But, yeah, he was my friend too.'

They went silent for a moment, then David picked up the wafting odours of singeing skin and flesh. God, he was hungry.

'What happened to you two? Well, y'don't have to be a brain-surgeon to see that some bugger locked you in this hut. But why? Was it those little yellowy-brown fellas?' Jackie asked, his deep furrowed brow crunched with question.

So, Jackie had seen them. How much could he – should he – tell this man who had just saved his life. Turner affirmed that it had been the Asians but white-lied on the reason, making up a semi-plausible story about a lease dispute. He didn't think the old man really bought it but the patriarch was too polite to probe further. David knew he had to keep this thing under wraps.

'Buggers chased us away 'bout a week ago,' the dark man said casually. 'Big guy with slant eyes, white skin. Like, he was pretty reasonable about it, not too heavy but bugger me, Dave, wouldn't like to meet him on a dark night. I could feel something real bad about that bloke.' Jackie looked expectantly at Turner.

'That's the one,' David agreed, remembering their deathly silent ride from the homestead to this camp and the Eurasian's occasional eerie, flashing smile. The arsehole knew what he had in store for them. 'Not a nice bloke at all.'

'Yeah. That's why we came back...when all these bloody big choppers flew over us out there yesterday arvo.' Jackie pointed far out to the north. 'They were real low; scared the shit out of us and we could see they were chock-a-block. Two were full of those little yella fellas.'

David thought a moment then asked. 'You see any of them close up?'

'Yeah. There were two with the big bugger when he moved us on. Funny looking blokes. Sorta Jap looking but not.'

Turner was wondering how many Japanese this outback dweller would have seen out here when this question was answered.

'I met plenty of Japs back in the war – in New Guinea with the army. You know what I mean by *met*,' he added with a quick grin.

I'll bet, David thought, taking in the wiry frame.

'Nah, I don't reckon those fellas are Japs,' Jackie concluded.

That had been Jim's opinion, and his own. And now that of a third. Then what the hell was Tanada Industries involvement? And they had spoken in bits of Japanese and some other language.

'The Chinooks – the choppers – did they have any markings?'

'Nope. Not a one. That bugged me too – that's why we came back this way. Bloody strange, eh!'

Yes, Turner thought. Just as strange as the fact that none of the Tanada vehicles they had glimpsed had any signage or registration plates.

Their thoughts and conversation were interrupted by Jackie's wife's call to come and eat.

'*A-la-carte* it's not,' Jackie quipped, amused at his own fusion of the cultures. 'But it'll do you good. Not too much though, eh!'

As he sat with this happy group, feasting on the lizard and witchetty grubs and the plant roots that only these desert dwellers could find, David wondered why so much had gone wrong between their races these past two hundred years. He knew of course – *white man's greed*. 'Great food. Thanks very much,' he complimented Jackie's wife. Ruth was her white name, which too was easier than her native one, for David anyway. He felt his strength returning but knew he would have to take things easy.

'Whatcha gonna do now, Dave?'

Turner hesitated. He would have to get Jim's body back to the homestead. But he desperately wanted to have a good look at what had been going on at this plant. And he didn't want these innocent people to learn anything they might inadvertently pass on.

'I'm not sure, Jackie. It seems like they've left in a hurry. There are a couple of four-wheel-drives over there. What say we see if they go? Then we can figure it out from there.'

In their haste, the Asians obviously had no concern about abandoning several millions worth of plant and support machinery. The two late-model Toyotas – one the six-wheeler he and Jim had been transported in, the other a tray back – were mechanically intact. But there were no ignition keys.

'No problem,' the old stockman smiled. 'Misspent youth!' It took him less than a minute per vehicle.

'Well, that's it. Jackie...' David looked deeply into the bloodshot eyes and felt choked with emotion. 'I...ah...all I can say is thank you once more. I owe you my life. If ever I can do anything for you or your family, you only have to ask, okay? I've given you my address and contact numbers. *Anytime for anything.* I mean it!'

The black man clasped him warmly. They were bound by life for life. He glanced sadly over at the six-wheeler in which lay his friend's body. 'You say goodbye for me when you bury him, okay!' True to Aboriginal custom, he would not mention Jim by name now that he was gone. 'And thanks for the truck. You sure...'

'Jackie...yes. I'll fix the paperwork up when I get to town. Don't you worry. I'll catch up with you sometime, eh!'

Turning slowly, the black man padded with his light-soled flat feet over to the trayback. His wife was in the cab; his son and grandsons happily sprawled in the back with four large canisters of fuel. *Beats all the bloody walking*, they'd said contentedly.

Turner watched as the family's dust cloud reached the flat red plain below then turned to the plant. He had two hours until dark. *Now let's see what the bastards were up to.*

The compound was erected in a U-shape, with the largest building – some one hundred feet long by forty feet wide – located centrally. Most of the pre-fabricated modules were linked but four, each only roughly twenty feet by twelve feet, stood alone. The stainless steel tower they had seen in the flyover thrust through the roof of the main structure, and was stayed by several heavy steel cables.

David commenced at the solo huts, figuring to methodically work his way around the U. Doors were unlocked, some even ajar such had been the pace of departure.

Either the Asians had finished whatever their devious activity was or something had frightened them away. David doubted that it had been he and Jim flying past yesterday – not at the distance. Although obviously

they had been seen and rapidly traced. *Hell*, David realised – they would have been watching Jim's place all the time.

The solo units were accommodation, six double bunks per hut, each with a small shower and toilet cubicle. Housing for around fifty men, David figured. Magazines and newspapers, in Japanese and some other script he did not recognise, were strewn here and there. Or left on beds, abandoned along with clothing and numerous personal items. They had certainly left in haste.

Turner passed into one end of the connected U-section. There was an orange forklift, still holding a suspended pallet with several mid-sized drums on it. To his left was row upon row of the same drums – all empty. To his right a few more but still sealed.

He continued into the adjacent section. There were more drums with different markings and what looked like a mixing plant that ended in a veed conveyor belt that disappeared through a large slot in the end wall. There was no connecting door.

David exited that unit and walked to the main building. Inside, it too seemed to be compartmentalized, with each section apparently designed for a specific task. He found a crushing plant, still with a stockpile of the uranium ore. It took him a few minutes to find the single entry point to the very central core.

When he entered he could see the base of the gleaming fifteen-foot diameter tower. It began about five feet off the floor, which David noticed was concrete, unlike the other sections. Below it was a concrete base, like an out of ground plinth some twenty-five foot square. There were large and small diameter pipes rising from this base and into the tower. Meters and butterfly valves abounded. He walked slowly around the structure, learning very little but noticing the array of control rooms and laboratories over to his right. Through their glazing this whole operation could be overseen and monitored.

The labs and control offices were as sophisticated as in any mining operation David had seen, with their equipment the best available. He passed along each array of control and read-out panels quite slowly, endeavouring to assess the purpose of each bank.

It was in one separate room however that deep concern began to rise. The machines he confronted had international symbols that he was very familiar with. *The standard symbols for the measurement of radioactivity.*

In the sweatbox with Jim, he'd not really taken his suspicions beyond the point that these people were surreptitiously extracting uranium ore. Maybe to smuggle it out and out sell it to some third party. He just hadn't thought it through enough under their circumstances.

But now, seeing what was in front of him, Turner knew that this small Asian operation on this isolated north-west Queensland plateau had very

sinister objectives.

With a new sense of urgency, he searched the benches and shelves of the laboratories, opening cupboards and looking feverishly until he found what he needed. A Geiger counter.

Returning swiftly to the radiation room, he perused the stylized map of the plant and its sensor points located with tiny red lights that would flash if a radiation leak occurred in any sector. Then David noticed something else in a corner of the large room. It was like an oversized seismograph machine that measures earth tremors. He used them all the time in his exploration work. But this one was different.

There were about twenty pens, each electronically linked to one of the sensor alarm points about the plant. The machine provided a continuous visual printout of what occurred at each station. As he ran his eyes down the wide graph paper that had spewed from the machine, he could see the massive needle oscillations that had been triggered by station fourteen.

It started with only minor variation, then grew wider and wider until the zigzag lines obscured the narrow steady-as-she-goes lines transmitted by stations thirteen and fifteen. Then it abruptly stopped, as did all other nineteen columns. Someone had switched the device off, at 3.42pm precisely. About the time yesterday that he and Jim had heard the frantic activity begin.

Turner noticed that he had begun to sweat, despite being used to this sort of heat. He knew a fair bit about the uranium process and his mind raced through the possibilities. When the yellowcake debates and violent demonstrations had been raging over whether Australia should export the damn stuff at all, he was a consultant to the consortium that held one of the major deposits. He had been privy to a lot of information that gave him a healthy respect for the substance. Okay if handled just right; deadly if not.

So, the plant had become *live* yesterday afternoon and prompted the Asians speedy exit. The questions began to throb in his head – *was it still live? Was he being irradiated right now?*

Tentatively he stretched his hand toward to the machine that would tell him, unsure if he really wanted to know. Switching it on, he swept the wand about the room then over his own body. The needle on the gauge hovered well above normal but not near the danger level indicated by the red line on the glass dial. With a silent prayer that the Geiger counter was functioning correctly, Turner opted to stay and search.

He studied the layout of the plant on the wall plan but couldn't locate station fourteen. Then, looking further along he saw that there was a diagrammatic cross-section. Fourteen was underground, directly below the tower and its massive concrete base. The section showed it as hollow. The

tower sat on a huge tank and below that was another similarly sized basement area. Station fourteen, where the massive radiation blowout had occurred. The memory of Chernobyl only seven years earlier passed through his mind.

He opened the command centre's door cautiously, leading with the wand in case the partition was insulated, thereby isolating the labs from the factory's main floor. There was no difference in the reading.

From the layout diagrams he had a rough idea where the stairs to the basement level should be, but absolutely no idea what was done down there. Circling around the tower and its base, he came to a lone door. It was marked with indecipherable writing yet the symbols conveyed the universal warning; DANGER – NO ADMITTANCE. Holding the Geiger before him, ready to leap back if the needle made any marked jump in level, David trepidly turned the handle. The door was locked. *Shit*. He looked around for something to force it and on the second pass saw the still shiny key lying not three feet away. Whoever had locked this door for the last time had no intention of coming back.

Gingerly placing the opener in the slot, he turned it slowly with his left hand, his right clutching the magic wand. As just a slit of opening appeared, the needle jumped two-fold, to rest steady just below the red line. More than five minutes would be dangerous. When he tried to push the door open further there was resistance. Whatever blocked the way budged only a little and his second sharp push stopped at the same point with a doughy dull thump.

David knew he was being rash. He should have got out of there, buried Jim and headed straight for the authorities. However these bastards had, indirectly or not, killed Jim Murphy and he was going to find out why.

Placing his right shoulder against the heavily built door he pushed hard. There was give and he heaved once more with all the strength he had. Whatever had been obstructing gave way. The sound of the object in falling and bouncing off the solid concrete treads and sidewalls of the stairway was dull and accommodating.

Turner opened the door fully and peered into the dark void, waiting for his eyes to adjust. Then he remembered the flashlight from the lab he had stuffed into his shorts pocket. He turned it on, swung the beam around and down, then wished he had not.

There were four men in varied repose on different levels of the stair. All obviously very dead, but not so obviously once Asian. They were all naked, their clothes strewn all over as they had torn at the garments to get them off their bodies that were being broiled from the inside.

The smell of their cooked flesh and oozing fluids hit David violently. But before what little food was in his stomach began to make its way up and exit, he had unfortunately already passed the light down the full length

of the stair. The obstacle he had shoved against lay at the lower landing, resting against a steel vault-like door. It was the head that went with the body at his feet.

He threw up, catching most of it with the door as he hauled it back inwards toward him. But not before his eyes had captured something they would further warp his understanding. Two of what were once men were face down, still attached heads pointed his way. And on each side of their bloated decomposing shoulders he saw the indelible markings. *Dragons entwined about a katana, red and black.*

David gazed down at the fresh soil at his feet. He had thought hard and long about what to say and concluded that Jim would have wanted it short. Murphy never wasted words and David knew the man had no time for established religion.

He had dug the holes under the shade of the huge eucalypt behind the house. Jim's beside his beloved wife's spot that was marked by the hand-carved heartwood plaque.

And alongside Jim there were three other diggings. At first David had thought about having one hole for all the dogs then decided against. They had been like his children – the ones he could never have after what had been done to him during the war. That was something else David had learnt when the old man opened up on that final evening. About an hour before he...

Turner slumped to his knees, with tears freely streaking his dirty face. 'Oh, Jim,' was all that croaked out.

When eventually he rose to his feet, Turner's crying was done. The plaque he had planned would have to wait. For his entire being was filled with vengeful rage and he would not rest until the perpetrators of this *filth* were dealt with. This he had silently vowed to the old man.

Out there somewhere in the world was the Eurasian Jimmy Shan and a bunch of other strange Asians with red and black dragon tattoos on their backs. They had killed Jim. And they were in possession of a significant quantity of *weapons-grade enriched Uranium*.

CHAPTER 3

Golden Triangle – Upper Burma, April 1945

'Father, father – come quickly.'

We Tai looked up from the half-completed carving he was working on, wondering what it could be this time. Often he wished that he wasn't the headman of their small village, with everyone loading their problems on to him.

He took stock of his sixteen-year-old son and the thought passed that maybe he could hand over earlier than was the custom. That would give him more time to do what he really wanted; to carve. Before his hands and eyes got too old for the intricate art, especially the gold leaf and pearl inlay work.

We Tai sighed and raised himself to his feet from his cross-legged position on the woven flax mat.

'What is it, son?' he asked. 'You know I do not like being disturbed at work unless it is quite urgent.'

'It is, father,' the youth blurted out, almost breathless from his fast run ahead of the others. 'We've found a man...a strange man. Out where we catch the monkeys. The others are bringing him in now.'

We Tai nodded wisely as always. After all, he *was* chief and had to give the impression of deep consideration on all matters.

'A strange man, you say. What sort of strange man? A green man, a purple man, a dead man...one with two heads?'

Lok Tai hesitated before he answered, then stammered. 'I don't know. He is not like any man I have seen. Not one of us, that is certain, father. And he is just alive.'

We Tai allowed appropriate time for his son to understand that he was evaluating the matter seriously and then grunted, letting the lad know that he deemed the concern worthy of his attention. With a sweep of his hand he deigned for Lok to lead him in the direction of this event, implying with a muttered aside that it had better be significant. After opening the loose skin flap at the entrance to their simple abode and holding it back respectfully for his father, Lok led in the direction of the square.

The village comprised some thirty thatched dwellings of varied sizes grouped in a rectangle. All were constructed in the same traditional style, with bamboo frames and interwoven walls of flax and broad hardy leaf.

The longhouse, where the serious debates on village business took place and festivities were held, was much larger and more elaborately decorated than any of the others.

We Tai knew that it wasn't much as far as villages went – he'd been to Mandalay once – but it was theirs and nothing had changed for three hundred years. And at least their mountain jungle location had kept them from the horrible things that he had learned had been happening on the lowlands these past four years.

'They think us highlanders backward,' he had said as he addressed the village assembly only two years ago. 'But hear for yourselves what has been relayed to us about the war down there.' That little tale had kept everyone thankful for their lot and his wise leadership right up until now.

We Tai, and even U Pot, the tribe's aged genealogist and historian, could not quite pinpoint the clan's true origin. From what he had learned on that youthful journey to the lowlanders' big town of Mandalay, they were regarded as inferior Montagnards. Mountain people who spread across the top of three or four nations; recognising neither national boundary nor authority. And who, in fact, cared not that much about even the next village. There were the Karen, Shan, Kachin, Wa and many other tribes who, when they were not fighting the national governments, were just as happy having a go at each other. All We Tai really knew and cared about was that by being here in their isolated region, they survived away from the problems of the inferior lowlanders and even the highland skirmishes.

Standing quite tall by their tribe's norm, at five-foot six, chief We Tai waited stoically in the humidity of the breathless square. Lok shuffled beside him in the damp earth, eager for his friends to arrive to prove his story. Ten minutes elapsed before the five youths emerged from the dense peripheral foliage. They had a makeshift bamboo litter suspended between them supporting a human form.

Without speaking, We Tai looked searchingly at the pathetic figure placed before him for several minutes. His people crowded around with just enough respectful distance, awaiting his inevitable sage verdict. He did not yet have one. Even in Mandalay some thirty years ago he had never seen such features, out of all the teeming multitudes there. The only other person in the entire village to have travelled further than twenty miles was U Pot who was now hovering close by in the certain expectation that his sage services would be needed given this exciting development. It was the biggest event in decades.

We Tai summonsed him closer and whispered in his ear. It could not be let known that he was stumped for an answer. U Pot was the only man he confided in and who understood the necessity to keep the lowlanders'

ways from their people.

The man laid on his back before them was about We Tai's height. They could tell that he had been through great deprivation for his body was covered in cuts and festering sores and the bites and suckings of the countless jungle parasites. His ribs stood out, being draped only with thin tissue, and skinny but once stocky legs protruded from the ragged garment that covered his loins. The man was bearded, although that growth had been crudely hacked at, as had been his unkempt hair. No doubt by the sword that had been found with the unconscious body and now lay beside it.

It was an exquisite thing, We Tai realized, staring at it again after initially giving only a cursory appraisal. Being a metallic craftsman he could see the many hundreds of hours of work in it. From the red and black bindings and the inlaid gold on the hilt to the curling dragon and sword motifs painstakingly carved down both sides of the long shiny blade. Even without bending closer he could see that the cutting edge was very sharp.

Finally, after discreet discussion with U Pot, he ordained that the day's finding be taken to the longhouse and balms applied to the man's ailments. He would retire there himself with U Pot to further deliberate the matter. We Tai's clan dispersed, disappointed yet happily anticipating the answer that would come forth eventually.

The leader and his confidant talked for nearly an hour. They were squatted on the floor at the far end of the meeting-house, far enough from the women administering the salves and remedies to this strange person that had arrived in their midst.

Reaching agreement on their tack with the people, We Tai rose and strode purposefully toward the main entry. He paused by his womenfolk who were tenderly bathing and applying ointments to the stranger's wounds. They had got some broth down his throat earlier, yet his breathing was still very slow and shallow. We Tai doubted the man would live beyond the night.

He and U Pot had concluded that the stranger was from across the seas. Perhaps one of the fierce ones that had come – as some lowlanders had said – to liberate the Burmese from the white people's rule. But how this one had come to such a sorry state was beyond him. Their last reporting from the lowlands only a year ago had these people firmly in command down there. Not that it was any of his people's business, nor would it have any effect upon them. They were not Burmese.

As he stepped toward the entry, now suitably prepared to address his people milling outside, We Tai looked back again at the strange-looking man and saw that the women had turned him over to begin their treatments on the back area. And he startled at the ornate red and black dragons dyed

into both of the man's shoulders. As an artisan with an eye for detail, he immediately matched the design with that on the sword.

Very strange indeed, We Tai thought. A man and his weapon so mated. Perhaps this stranger is a warrior.

It was cause for reflection before he made his address to the people. Perhaps he could bring the warrior factor into his speech; it usually gave immense satisfaction that lasted days. For while his people now had a simple culture that was self-sufficient, requiring only rare trading contact with other far away communities, this had not always been so. U Pot, in his telling of the chronicles passed down to him from his predecessors, often spoke of their fierce warrior ancestry. Every time he related the sagas in the great hall the men and youths would get agitated, exclaiming excitedly at each other what they would do if anyone ever dared to attack or even disturb them.

Afterward they would fade back to their peaceful homes; the men to make exaggerated manly love to their women and the youths to dream of the glory of future battle, usually passing on to which girls to pursue tomorrow.

After consideration, We Tai decided to hold on the martial aspect. He would wait until they knew more about this intruder.

Twelve days passed since the stranger had entered their lives. After two days he had been sitting up, smiling weakly in appreciation of the ministrations and was the epitome of a grateful receiver. In two more days, despite the language barrier, the man had the women tending him giggling, acting flirtatiously and vying for the privilege of tending him. On the fifth day he had risen and began to walk with increasing vigour around and around inside the large meeting-house, only pausing at times to stare out the openings. At that time he also made it be known that he needed more food.

Day six the stranger commenced a regimen of exercise that was utterly foreign to We Tai's people. And the disciplines steadily increased in difficulty and intensity over the next six days while the villagers discreetly observed.

Breathing techniques were encompassed, along with soft dance-like movements, repeated over and over again, his legs and arms moving in unison to some unknown pattern. Then had come the forceful ones. One hundred fast push-ups on his knuckles, followed by one hundred fast sit-ups. Each two or three times a day. Fierce set moves of swift striking actions of hands, elbows, knees and feet, all aimed at some imaginary point in front, at the side or behind him. Repeated again and again, as were the strange guttural words that accompanied the movements. Ceased only

for food, drink and bodily function.

We Tai watched carefully, with growing trepidation as he saw the man's body repair, flesh out and become honed with solid muscle. When he talked with the alien in this period, or more correctly, exchanged symbolic gestures that eventually conveyed their respective messages, the stranger was civil and at times even deferential. But, as the days passed, We Tai sensed condescension, almost contempt. *Who was this being from afar?*

Now, on the thirteenth day, the stranger with the dragon tattoos on his back had requested an audience. Not just with him but the whole village.

We Tai consulted with U Pot at length on this. Their exhaustive discussion, and at times debate, arrived at the only possible conclusion. The stranger wished to thank them all for his salvation and recovery. Yes, that was it. It could be quite ceremonial, in fact a sort of impromptu festival. We Tai found himself gladdened at the prospect. They had also just learnt that the war down in the lowland had been completed. Not that it bothered them but it made a person feel happier. Yes, it would be a celebration.

The next day We Tai's people assembled in the earthen square. They were agog with excitement and expectation. Nothing much ever happened, so this was very special and they garbed themselves in their finery. We Tai – out of respect for the stranger's dignity – had one of his own best-occasion outfits taken over to him, together with the man's only real possession; the ornate sword.

Amongst We Tai's people, the exchange of gifts at such times was customary. He himself had selected one of his better works, a long pipe for smoking the slowing-down weed. It was heavily encrusted with inlay and of a particularly fine pattern. Yes, the gifts were respectful. The stranger's sword had more value no doubt – but had they not saved him from certain death?

The villagers had a collective sway in their mass, impatience showing through. Then, not quite as one, they sighted and murmured as their stranger appeared at the main opening to the elevated community hall.

He looked most resplendent in We Tai's apparel – dignified and important. Yet still, his face was not of theirs; it was unrefined, almost ugly despite being smooth shaved.

However, the man held his sword in front of him with two hands, as if offering it even before he descended the steps. *Oh, yes*, We Tai thought. The *symbolism* was very good. His people will be talking about this for years and his stature even further entrenched.

He was sitting in semi-lotus position on the festivity mats, as were the others in the front row beside him. His wife was on his left and alongside her, his two sons. To his right sat U Pot, his sometimes mentor and

almost-equal dignitary. This was a very special day.

Behind them the village populace was ranked in degree of wealth or family importance, which usually meant the same.

The odd man with the obscure practices descended the steps at an appropriate ceremonial pace and We Tai swelled with the moment.

When the stranger halted one body length in front of him and bowed low from the waist, placing the precious gift on the small yet obvious mat between them, We Tai knew that this event would most certainly be memorised by U Pot and passed on for all time.

With a proud flourish, he gestured with one hand for this clearly honourable person to seat himself on the cushion placed before them. With his other hand We Tai drew the fine pipe from behind him and laid it equally ceremoniously close and parallel to the saved man's offering.

The stranger did not sit down in their fashion, but went down on his knees then, hands outstretched, palm downward, bowed low before the villagers in obeisance. We Tai forced himself to maintain a dignified serenity, while relishing what this event was doing for his station.

The pleasurable thoughts lasted for less than three seconds. For the blurred hissing *katana* had by then sliced into the junction of his neck and right shoulder and continued with ease down through his chest until it cleaved his heart. Even if he still had life, We Tai would have had no time to register the fluid withdrawal and sweeping horizontal arc that severed his head from his body. Nor the third swift strike across U Pot's throat that then came up and back into Lok, We Tai's eldest son, and around in an arc to penetrate his youngest. All done over and about the transfixed form of his wife.

The chief's brother, An Tai, was only just to his feet in the second row and still drawing his dress long-knife when he was divided from forehead to sternum.

Four fierce younger men came rushing from the flanks to surround this monster, swords and knives raised in concerted attack. The stranger suddenly stopped still in their centre, thrusting his sword upright into the earth and held out his hands, palms upturned. The four avengers hesitated only a second at the prospect of the demon surrendering to their odds. And before ten further seconds elapsed, they too lay dead and bleeding into the moist soil. Terminated by the flurry of shattering blows to their heads and vital organs that had come from the feet and fists of the outsider. Naive victims to the strategy of *Tai No Sen* – the feigning of weakness.

The alien slowly scanned the petrified throng for further challenge. Seeing none, he quickly stripped off the blood-spattered begemmed shirt given to him by We Tai and threw it to the ground. His arms rose to stop

in a vee above him and an indescribable deep moan began from deep in his stomach region. It magnified as it progressed upward and, when it emanated, the sound created terror, abetted by the intensity of the quivering double dragons etched on his shoulders.

'Kiaiiiiiiiiiii.....'

One of the ferocious demons of their ancestors – so vividly described to them by U Pot – had returned to punish the simple highland villagers for their disbelief.

The isolated, peaceful mountain community – that gave no allegiance to any of the nations that divided their jungles with arbitrary lines – had lost its three hundred year insulation from the affairs of the other world.

CHAPTER 4

Canberra, Australia 1993

'Listen, John...' They had said to call him by his first name, so David did. He had to get it through to him. Prime Minister of Australia or not, this was not a point-score off the Opposition matter. 'This is very *real*. Ask your ASIO man here.'

The P.M. nodded. 'He's already briefed me, David. I just wanted to hear it direct from you. It's bloody *incredible*. Mike...' He waved for the greying, innocuous looking but very astute Director of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation to take over.

In his methodical, matter-of-fact manner, the Director began his discourse. He had served many Prime Ministers due to Australia's high political turnover these past twenty years, but he particularly liked this new one. The man had a brain despite his charismatic T.V. appeal.

'As you all know gentleman, David's story checks out. We found everything at the Queensland mine exactly as he described – the bodies and all.' Even the experienced, war-weary Mike Hamilton shuddered inwardly as he recalled the awful scene.

'Now...it's obvious that a large and expensive operation was carried out to both extract and process uranium ore. What quantities, what degree of enrichment, and who is behind this we have not been able to determine yet. Maybe we will not for some time. Tanada Industries is the only link.'

He paused to look over at the two other men in the P.M.'s office, making sure that they felt included – their input was very necessary. Brigadier-General Bill Morley, Chief of the Australian Defence Force, and Leonard Lee, young but internationally renowned and the foremost expert in nuclear physics in the country.

'We know that their operation was both illicit and totally ruthless in pursuit of their goal; witness the treatment of David and Jim Murphy and even of their own personnel. So...they have come in, operated undetected for several months, then left hurriedly after what appears to be failure in their processing. Either that or they had enough of what they wanted anyway. Now...we have few facts to go on but we have been a bit lucky. Well, sort of. Bill...' Hamilton stopped, sipping from the water glass in front of him, as he indicated for the General to take over.

Morley had been David Turner's SAS commanding officer in Vietnam. And friend; alive today only because of Turner's actions taken in an covert

operation in 1968. Whereas David opted out of the military as soon as possible after his two tours, Colonel Morley had stayed in service. It was via him that David had managed just two days ago to penetrate the bureaucratic barriers and the minders preventing anything or anyone getting directly through to the P.M.

'From what David told us, the choppers were Chinooks; flying on the deck, heading north, no markings. Our first quick aerial flyover gave us nothing. The mine site is near enough to three hundred miles south of the Gulf of Carpentaria, but when you take into account the Chinook's range, and the coverage of our radar installations, the probabilities of flight-path firm up a bit.' General Morley hesitated briefly before continuing.

'That whole northern area has huge holes in it as far as a small force goes. And all we have for surveillance of hundreds of miles of uncovered coastline are three small observation planes, manned and operated only during daylight. And they're not the military's – they're private enterprise, on contract.' The General looked expectantly at his own C.O. – the P.M.

'Got the picture, Bill. Jindalee over-the-horizon radar is supposed to be fully operational by now but as you know they're having problems.' the P.M. said, then added. 'I'll try to get more planes up there, and at night.'

David visualised the area as Morley was talking. He'd been up there often, camping and fossicking. And many times he had seen the low-flying planes buzz over at night without lights. Heading in with their illicit dope from New Guinea, then out a few hours later, carrying guns for the rebels on Bougainville or rare birds for sale on the international black market. The Northern Defence Line was an expensive joke.

Morley resumed. 'There are about three corridors that the Chinooks could have taken. We had them all run and found the bloody things on the second sweep. Well, not the choppers themselves. Just where they landed – refuelling tanks and that sort of thing were stored under camouflage just in from a beach on the Gulf.'

After a brief scan of his colleagues the General carried on.

'The spot is remote, inaccessible other than by helicopter or boat; well selected for the mission. *Presuming* they're headed for somewhere in south-east Asia they can only island hop to get wherever it is. Now – that would require several stops. Either on New Guinean or Indonesian territory, or both. Of course, we have alerted the authorities of those countries but we don't expect much from it.'

Morley paused, to see if any of his four attentive listeners had any query or contribution to make, and also to prepare for what he had to say next. Hell, he was the Defence commander and he could not find three bloody big helicopters and now had to admit it.

'We've drawn a total blank. The bastards have just disappeared. My personal conclusion – and this is being followed up on now – is that they

rendezvoused with a tanker or similar vessel somewhere way out of our territorial waters. I'm sorry, gentlemen, but that's all I can tell you at this point.' The general slumped back in his comfortable chair but it afforded little relaxation.

An awkward silence reigned for a few seconds before John Hawson swivelled to his intelligence chief. 'Anything else?'

'Bits and pieces, Sir,' Hamilton stated resignedly.

'Nothing much more than what's been said – as far as facts go. But I have pieced together a fair bit of speculation. First we...' he trailed off as an aide interrupted to bring him several sheets of facsimile transmissions. After scanning them swiftly he gave the expectant audience the content.

'A prawn trawler up in the Arafura Sea, just inside our waters, hauled in an unusual catch this morning. Two bodies. Bloated and decomposing and not from being in the water. I won't go into the full description here – but they match the ones found at the mine, right down to the tattoos. It looks like some of our Asian visitors are still cooking. Even the sharks hadn't touched them.'

'Fucking good job,' Turner muttered, to himself he believed.

'My sentiments exactly, David,' the nearby P.M. responded with the hint of a repressed smile. 'But let's try and stick to facts. What else, Mike?'

Hamilton had risen to his feet and began to pace the plush blue carpet back and forth between the long mahogany table and thick glazing that provided the south view overlooking the rear plaza and heavily treed park between Capital and State Circles. Not that any of the five men assembled could notice a view today. Thinking on his feet, the Director talked as he paced, as was his manner.

'Okay. Before these faxes arrived I was prepared to give you my speculations. They have firmed somewhat, but first I'll deal with the bodies. And the second fax is related to that. My boys up there put a few elements together...with the help of several local trawler operators. They concluded that given the prevailing winds and currents, the bodies had been dumped, from the Chinooks we presume, about here.' He had reached the large wall map of Australia and its neighbours and held a pointer at the co-ordinates given to him.

'Now...the mine is here,' he said, moving the stick to a point deep in north-west Queensland, to the south-west of Mount Isa. 'And the refuelling station was here.' The baton went to a spot on the edge of the Gulf of Carpentaria, well away from the nearest habitation in Burketown.

'The connection line of mine site and fuel dump runs near enough to due north; the shortest route. But the bodies were dumped over here.' Hamilton lifted the pointer up and to his left, coming once more to rest just below the dark red line that divided the blue sea between Australia and Indonesia. It was south of the Indonesian island of Pulau Selaru, and

almost due north of Darwin.

'To get there unseen by our northern defensive radar they would have to have flown north virtually at sea level up to about here.' The stick stabbed at a point halfway between Cape Arnhem and New Guinea, 'Then turned sharp west-north-west.'

'Now, Bill,' he addressed the General. Their ranks were in different services and at least equal. 'If that's the route they flew, where would they have to put down? I mean, how much further than this point?' The baton re-tapped the spot where it was estimated the bodies had been dumped.

Bill Morley rose and approached the map. He picked up the rule kept on the ledge beneath and, after checking the map's scale, applied it to the chart several times. Then, re-seated, he scribbled a few calculations and pronounced. 'Not very much further. That is presuming they had standard tanks. They could have had long-range fitted.'

The Director digested this logically – and logic was his trade – then gave his conclusions.

'No, I don't think so. But rather than waste time with my reasoning on that, I'll tell you; I know so. The second fax came from the Indonesian authorities. They have found a mid-sized freighter drifting off Timor. Abandoned, no markings. Signs of recent activity on board, including helicopter landings on the deck. Bill's earlier hypothesis is correct. The question is – where did they go from there?'

'Refuelled from the ship and carried on?' the P.M. volunteered.

'I doubt it, Sir,' Hamilton answered. 'To reach South East Asia from that position by helicopter would be logistically near impossible without multiple stations dotted through Indonesian islands. And the Indonesians are not very forgiving of intrusion into their air space. My guess is that they dumped the choppers into the sea and continued on in a large high speed motor launch.'

'Okay, suppose they did,' Hawson stated. 'But to bloody where?'

Hamilton pondered a while, hands in pockets and head hanging before he resumed his pacing and soliloquy.

'There are several factors that are seemingly unconnected, yet now – partly in hindsight and partly on the basis of new information – are coming together. *One...*the route in and out of this country was obviously known to them. They must have been extremely confident of success to have taken such risk, with an operation of his scale.

'*Two...*they were definitely Asians and all those we have in hand, so to speak, have this double dragon emblem tattooed on their shoulders.

'*Three...*their leader, here in Australia anyway, this Eurasian David has described...' Hamilton flourished in Turner's direction, '...is utterly ruthless.'

'*Four...*and this is something none of you could know about yet as I'm

waiting on final lab analysis. All of the six *specimens* have, apart from radioactivity, traces of heroin in their bodies.'

Hamilton stopped, absorbing the astonished expressions around the table. Before the others could raise either hand or voice he motioned for them to wait. 'Now, the P.M. asked me where I thought these intruders had gone. Think about the four points I have just made.' Hamilton halted, looking at the quizzical faces as their minds churned. It wasn't a game with him, just his style. Not really a self-checking process either for he was reasonably certain of his analysis.

Hawson, the Prime Minister, spoke first. '*One* implies that they came in on a known smuggling route – birds or drugs. Or military knowledge. *Two* that they are part of some Tong or similar society.' Hawson had stopped there, not because he did not have his own thoughts on three and four, but he believed in consensus, sharing the input. The Director nodded approvingly, like a schoolteacher at question time.

David pre-empted the others. He was becoming impatient, although fascinated with the new revelations. He wanted the real and conclusive answers that he felt Hamilton had, not charade games. For he had a very personal stake in this.

'*Three* implies that they will stop at nothing to achieve their aims. That they are fanatical; perhaps some terrorist or liberationist group. *Four* that – like one and two – they are involved in, or somehow allied with the drug trade. That maybe their triad or whatever it is uses heroin addiction to control its members. Keep them in hand...something like that.'

Mike Hamilton eyed this bush geologist carefully and made a mental note to have a good look at the man's file. When General Morley had contacted him urgently two days ago he'd taken him at his word that if Turner said something was so, then it was real.

'Those answers fit with my assessment also,' Hamilton stated without any condescension, for he was not like that. 'But, most of this is still hypothetical. We still do not know where they are from or going, what they intend to do with what they've produced – though I guess that's obvious. Leonard here will brief us on the possibilities shortly. But I need two things first – let me make a call to the labs.'

The communications took nearly ten minutes and meanwhile two powerful men, a nuclear scientist and one lone geologist fidgeted while nervously chatting. Sometimes about the affair at hand but more often about anything not to do with it.

Hamilton returned from the phone at the Prime Minister's private desk. His face was grim as he spoke.

'Well. The *heroin* – it is definitely Golden Triangle stuff, not Middle East. That narrows down to Thailand, Laos, and Burma. Maybe a few regions just outside. As expected, but I thought it was worth checking.

However...' he paused here, looking perplexed for it was rare that his hypotheses, even hunches, were not borne out. 'The second test I was waiting on was genetic. I had hoped that DNA tests would determine what racial group this party belonged to. That would help pinpoint our source, where they came from. I'm afraid, gentlemen, the boffins do not have an answer.' Hamilton sat down heavily. He had been on this for two days without sleep.

The Prime Minister, after thinking for a moment, was first to question. He was an economist by profession, not a biologist. 'What do you mean, Mike? They're Asians, aren't they? What's this DNA business? Please explain.'

Hamilton looked tiredly at them, then began, almost reluctantly for he had no conclusions. 'DNA testing involves the matching of the specific molecular chain that attaches to our genes. It's what determines who we are, what we look like and so on. For example – I'm white, a Caucasian. I marry a Caucasian; our children are Caucasian. Leonard here...' he said indicating the physicist '...is Chinese. He marries my sister; their children get a bit of both of them. I marry his sister, same thing. All this can now be analysed in a laboratory at a molecular level. We are all genetically fingerprinted. The process is now admissible in court. If a man rapes a woman, his sperm can be matched to within 99.9% certainly, just like he left his fingerprints on her fanny! Sorry...'

The Prime Minister shrugged and indicated for Hamilton to continue. He was a man of the world, a realist as well as a politician. Besides, this meeting was behind closed doors, unrecorded, and they needed answers fast.

'Okay,' Hamilton continued. 'We have got six bodies, all Asian in appearance. Fact. Recall what Jim Murphy had said,' and he paused in deference to David, '–that he didn't think they were Japanese. The Aborigine, Jackie, who was in New Guinea during World War Two, said he was sure they were not Japanese. David, who was in Vietnam and has had mineral dealings with the Japanese, says they weren't Japanese. So what the hell are they?'

Hamilton walked forward two paces, took a deep draught from his water glass and wished the liquid was a stronger brew. 'The genetic people have run their analysis through every appropriate lab in the world. *There is no match to the DNA strain that these Asians possess.*'

He looked at each of his four listeners and, seeing blank response, continued. 'Look, we know that they're Asian...because they have Asian features. Skin...eyes...hair...and facial structure. But there are only four principle groups of people we classify as South-East and East Asian. We have the Japanese, who are racially distinct from the Chinese. Most of the other Asian countries are ethnically close to the Chinese, apart from the

Malays. Then there are the Burmese, who are closer to the Tibetans. All *these* people are classified as Mongoloid, as opposed to Negroid, Caucasian and so on. Subtle variations to the DNA chain give each their distinctive features. But our boyos, our six, do not fit in with any of the specific groups. It's like they are some brand *new race*. 'Mongoloid, yes...but not Japanese, Chinese, Burmese, Thai, Cambodian, Korean, Philippino or Indonesian.' Hamilton stopped and sat himself down. 'Any comment?'

David spoke up. 'Look...it's twenty-five years since I was over there, during the Vietnam War. But I still remember the difference. And I was in Japan last year on business and have been before. Those buggers that took me and Jim – apart from the Eurasian – had sort've Jap features but softer. Does that help?'

Hamilton considered a moment then answered. 'Maybe...but not much at this point.'

'Alright,' David responded. 'There was one other thing.' He hesitated, remembering carefully to be sure before he conveyed his thoughts. There were the four with the Eurasian at the homestead. And he'd seen about ten others reasonably close up at the mine, before he and Jim were locked up. His mind zoomed in, focusing on the faces. Yes.

'They mostly looked near the bloody same. Same facial features...eyes, mouth, nose. Not exactly, but damn close. And the majority were young, early twenties at a guess. The few older ones looked a bit different again, even softer in feature. Maybe that will...' He stopped and shrugged at the group. It was all he could contribute.

Hamilton looked thoughtful, then said, 'I'll pass that on to the genetics people. The six bodies we have...well, they've all decomposed very rapidly...no chance of checking visual features now unfortunately. Still, something may come out of it.' Turner sensed that Hamilton had more on his mind than he was prepared to say just yet.

'Well, where do we go from here?'

It was John Hawson speaking as his eyes scanned the four others at the table. 'We know they're some sort of Asians, but not where from. We *assume* they're heading back to wherever they came from...but what are their intentions with this enriched uranium? And what about Tanada Industries? The bloody scam was done in their name wasn't it, Mike?'

Hamilton nodded. 'Yes, Sir. We checked on the French firm – the geotechnical consultants. They're legitimate, operating worldwide. They were commissioned by Tanada to find a uranium site. It had to be new, unknown. And when they found one it had to be kept quiet. Which is, of course, totally against the laws of this country, and internationally. But you know the French – and there's no love lost between us over their H-bomb testing on Mururoa. And the Rainbow Warrior sinking in New

Zealand. The legal boys are already working on the things to charge them with.' The ASIO chief paused to regroup his thoughts before continuing.

'Anyway...to the Tanada link. Sir, any response from the Ambassador in Tokyo?'

That Hamilton still called him *Sir* annoyed Hawson but he'd given up trying to retrain the man. After all, he'd served five prime ministers over twenty-five years and if that's the way he wanted it, so be it.

'Not yet, Mike. He has tried getting to Mr Oda Tanada himself but is having little success. Now he's working at Government level, seeing if he can shake them up a bit. But over there, as you'd know, big business and the Government are almost synonymous.'

Hamilton agreed. 'That's right. The big industrial and financial groups, the *kieretsus*, work in real close with the *MITI* – the Ministry for International Trade and Industry. It's like a politico-commercial family designed to look after their trade interests. Though the Americans are forcing a few changes these days.'

David had experienced the Japanese business style only the year before, and nodded to himself. They were tough to deal with.

It was the Prime Minister who now rose from his chair and began to pace with agitation, emphasizing his points with a waving forearm and index finger.

'Listen. We've got to move on this. If Tanada is involved, the question is why? They're already in nuclear power; they buy uranium yellowcake from us for their power stations. So why set up this secret installation? They've spent and abandoned millions to do what surely they could have done at home.'

The ASIO chief answered with uncharacteristic swiftness.

'No, Sir...they couldn't. The International Atomic Energy Agency of the U.N. monitors all uranium sources, quantities and distribution. They keep tabs on its end use and in the case of breeder reactors – ones that create more radioactive fuel than they use – continue to monitor that. It is extremely difficult to steal the stuff and apply it to any other use...of which there's really only one.'

'Bombs?' the Prime Minister queried.

'Yes. But even then the, say, *troublesome* countries that might try and make atomic weapons are watched even more carefully. Especially since the Iraqi business a couple of years ago – they damn near got there too. And that was after the Israelis took out Iraq's reactor back in '81.' Hamilton reflected a moment. 'My point is...virtually the only way to obtain enriched uranium unbeknown to the watchdogs is to do what Tanada, or whoever is using Tanada as a cover, has done here. That, or a country with its own secret uranium reserves decides to build H-bombs or covertly sell its uranium to another party with similar warped intentions or

political persuasions. The problem for both of them here of course is that these countries are usually what we call *third world*. Some may have the money, but not the technology required to enrich uranium to weapons grade. They can try and steal that technology, or buy it in bits and pieces from various naive or greedy advanced nations or companies and then try to assemble the jigsaw back home. That's what Iraq did. The U.N. investigators sent in after the Gulf War found four kilograms of enriched uranium and the absolute latest in centrifuge design in production there, intended for uranium enrichment. They were only a year or so off their bombs. But...the more wide spread, and the greater the number of dealings, so the odds on being detected increase. However, this doosey of a clandestine operation not only got hold of uranium...it somehow enriched it on the spot – *cheaply* – and with nothing like conventional technology!"

There was a tense reflective silence in the room, finally broken by the Prime Minister. 'Okay, I accept that it's been done somehow. But couldn't it have been easier for them just to pinch the ore – in, dig, smuggle it away. Process it somewhere else...back where they come from and presumably control? They could have had it all set up, just waiting for the ore. Hell of a lot quicker and less risk?'

Hamilton absorbed his new bosses' comments, then deferred to David Turner. 'You're the geologist, David. Could you answer that, please?'

Turner felt the handover was more a test, a probing, than Hamilton's lack of knowledge. David thought for a few seconds, assembling the data and sieving out the over-technical before he spoke.

'Sure. Uranium is not found sitting there as a deposit all on its own, John. And it's never pure uranium. It is always an oxide, a salt of uranium found in over a hundred other mineral ores, especially pitchblende and carnotite. Pitchblende has the richest yield but even then huge amounts of ore have to be processed, by one of several means, to extract the uranium. Okay so far?'

The P.M. gestured that he was following.

'Once the uranium oxide is separated from its host ore, which is all we do here in Australia; extract the oxide and on-sell it as almost non-radioactive *yellowcake*, it has to be treated to provide pure uranium. But even then, pure uranium is a mixture of three isotopes. Ninety-nine percent of it is U238, which is basically stable. There's a trace of U234, and less than one percent is U235 – the fissile or unstable part that is necessary for bomb making. I understand that there are various ways to enrich the stable isotopes of uranium that suit the controlled reaction in a power plant, but only the volatile U235 is suitable for uranium bombs. That and the plutonium resulting from nuclear reactors. That is...man-made fissile material. I...ah...my knowledge on what happens from there is

pretty limited. From here on that's Mr. Lee's territory.'

David looked at the passive scientist who gave a benign smile and signalled with a thumb up that so far David was on track.

'In answer to your query, John,' Turner added, 'the smuggling out of sufficient bulk ore to eventually obtain a viable amount of Uranium235 would be a massive operation.'

'And far more noticeable than setting up an innocuous little plant out in the back of nowhere on the largest island continent on earth,' Hamilton added. 'Now I think, gentlemen, we had better let Mr. Lee enlighten us on what he thinks our weird little alien band has been up to. And please, Leonard. Keep it simple – for our simple minds!'

When the lean be-spectacled Chinese Australian had finished his half-hour dissertation there were four visibly shaken men slumped in their leather seats in the private office of the Prime Minister of Australia.

It was then, after requesting Turner and Lee to adjourn to the reception area, that the Prime Minister, his Director of Intelligence and the Chief of Defence Forces conferred deeply for forty-five minutes. Arriving at their only possible conclusion, the instruction was given for a call to be placed directly to the President of the United States, regardless of the late hour in that country.

The necessity to inform President Christopher Corrigan of the events in Australia was inevitable. Imperative given Lee's opinions. However doing so weighed heavily on all three men. For they each knew the real character of the man that existed behind the slick image and spin that the White House publicists spewed forth on a daily basis.