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The Man from Barbarossa

Written by John Gardner

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THE MAN FROM BARBAROSSA

John Gardner



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PRELUDE

BABI YAR

They came in an orderly fashion, the Jews of Kiev. They came anxiously though not really afraid – not yet, for the notices posted around the city had simply said they were to be relocated. They came with what they could carry. They came in their hundreds, men, women and children. They came with hope. They came at peace with God. They came unprepared. They came, rightly as it turned out, with fear. They came to the corner of Melnik and Dekhtyarev Streets, just as they had been told.

Hitler's invasion of Soviet Russia, code-named Operation Barbarossa, had begun only three months, seven days earlier, on June 22nd, 1941, for it was now September 29th of that same year – the year Stalin had disregarded all warnings of a Nazi invasion, believing it to be a trap set by England to promote bad feeling between Russia and Germany.

Ten days previously, the Twenty-Ninth Corps and the Sixth German Army had overrun the proud city of Kiev, capital of the Ukraine, known before the Revolution as Holy Kiev, for the city stood on the site of the first Russian Christian church.

Now the Jews came as they were bidden, allowed themselves to be organised into ordered rows and marched slowly along Melnik Street out towards the old Jewish cemetery and the bleak forbidding Babi Yar ravine.

The men who surrounded them were from Sonder-kommando 4a, comprising men of the SD and Sipo – the Security Service and

Security Police – together with the third company of the Special Duties Waffen-SS battalion and a platoon of No. 9 Police Battalion, reinforced by Police Battalion No. 305 and units of the Ukrainian Auxiliary Police.

When they drew near to the ravine, the hordes of Jewish people were funnelled through barbed wire. They were made to hand over their valuables, then strip naked and advance towards the edge of the ravine in groups of ten.

Once there, they were gunned down by the SD, Sipo and SS units. There were cries of terror once the shooting began, but those detailed to send the people forward showed no mercy. They closed their ears to the hysterical screaming of the women and children, closed their eyes to the awful sights, closed their minds to everything except their duty. Like men who work in an abattoir, they dragged the children, mothers with babies, old men, weeping and praying stark naked towards the edge of the ravine.

When the day ended the bodies were covered with a thin layer of soil and the death squads went back to their barracks and extra rations of vodka.

For two days there was nothing but blood, shattered bone, riven flesh and the eternal yattering of the machine guns and when those two days were over, thirty-three thousand, seven hundred and seventy-one Jewish people had been murdered in that wild, desolate and horrible place. Those who visit the awful site today will swear they can hear the screams and pleading which, for forty-eight hours, filled the air, punctuated only by the rip of bullets.

The instigator of this fearful crime against humanity, SS-Standartenführer Paul Blobel, was sentenced to death in 1948. He was hanged at the Landsberg prison on June 8th, 1951. During the trial, much was said of Blobel's deputy, SS-Unterscharführer Josif Vorontsov. He was the one, they said, who drove the men, women and children on towards their deaths, herding them in groups of ten to the ravine at Babi Yar.

What made Vorontsov's crime more heinous was that he was a Ukrainian who, in 1941, during the early stages of Operation Barbarossa, surrendered to the SS and became one of the many 'foreign recruits' serving with the Waffen-SS Special Duties Brigade. Once the war ended, many organisations and individuals searched for traces of the man, but found little. It was known that he had, at one point, sometime in the summer of 1942, served under the infamous SS Commandant Franz Reichleinter at the Polish extermination camp near the town of Sobibór, where many hundreds of thousands of Jews were sent to the gas chambers.

When the Polish underground finally brought about an insurrection at Sobibór, Josif Vorontsov evaded capture. Years later, in 1965, during the investigation of eleven SS officers who had served at the camp, more information came to light concerning the Ukrainian turncoat. There were even hints that he had escaped to North America with the help of Spinne or Odessa, the groups that proved so adept at transforming former SS officers into blameless citizens. There were, however, no hard facts.

His name went on to the lists of wanted war criminals, but he was never found. Nothing more was heard of Josif Vorontsov until December 1990.

HAWTHORNE

The town of Hawthorne, New Jersey, is less than one hour's drive from the centre of Manhattan, yet a stranger, dropped there by some magic, could be forgiven for imagining that he was in a small English North Country town.

True, the main road is wider than any you will find in Lancashire, Yorkshire, or Tyne and Wear, but the terraced brick houses have that same look you see in some of the hardy uncompromising communities around, say, Bolton or Blackburn. The overhead power lines and traffic lights signal that you are in America, but the feel of the place is strangely similar to the English North.

One of Hawthorne's favourite eating places is a single-storey Italian restaurant called Ossie's, named after its proprietor. On most nights it is full, and the tall dark figure of Ossie threads his way through the tables, taking orders, engaging in banter with his regulars and providing what he, and his clients, believe to be the best Italian food in the whole of the United States.

On Wednesday December 26th, 1990, he greeted one of his most stalwart customers with a sympathetic, almost compassionate smile, for old Joel Penderek ate at Ossie's on at least four nights of the week. Before the previous September, Joe, as he was generally known, had only been a weekly visitor together with his wife Anna. But Anna, who was never known to have had a day's illness, had died with a suddenness which shattered old Joe's happy and ordered life, on the previous Labor Day. There,

baking and chattering one minute, and dead the next. The doctor said it was a massive heart attack and that he had already warned Anna several times that she carried too much weight and her cholesterol level was way above the acceptable norm.

This helped old Joe Penderek not a jot. He had met, and fallen in love with Anna, on the boat in 1946, and had married her as soon as they both knew they had been accepted by the immigration authorities.

Joe was twenty-nine years old when he came to America, Anna was twenty-seven and they both acknowledged that they were among the lucky ones. They seldom talked about their experiences in Europe, but those who spent any time with them knew they were Russian Jews who had been saved from one of the Nazi extermination camps, spending several months in one of the Allied DP centres before being passed on, via a compassionate American major, and swallowed by a group of assorted survivors earmarked for the USA. Anna had told her neighbour, Debbie Mansell, that all her family who had escaped death had been sent back to Russia where they disappeared. Joel's relatives had all died in the camps. It was wicked and cruel, but who said life would be fair?

Within a year of their marriage, Joe, who, until then, had kept them both by taking casual labour, landed a good job with a local construction company, and, as the years passed, so he had risen, from labourer to foreman, from foreman to site manager, and from site manager to retirement with a healthy pension. Now he had become a sad, lost figure who preferred his own company, as though some inner pride dictated that a man should be able to exist alone, and in his own private environment, once his life's partner had gone for ever.

So he kept to himself, nodded a half-hearted thanks-but-no-thanks to those who tried to befriend him, going about some routine which became almost ritualistic and included dining alone at Ossie's on four nights of the week. People stopped at his table, passed a few words with him, but seldom stayed long,

for the old man seemed positively to resent old friendships. For the first time, people noticed that the tall, once muscular, man had acquired a haunted look, there, deep in his eyes. It was a look which said, 'have care; do not come too close, for I am a man estranged from the world. I am a man born to sorrows.' The craggy face seemed to have been affected by the eyes which appeared to have grown larger than folk recalled. The leathery skin was cracked, as though some plastic surgeon's work had gone awry, the skin itself taut against the cheekbones, while the lips were afflicted with a perpetual tremble. People said he was not at all like the old Joel Penderek they had known and loved all their lives. This was a shadow of that man.

Nobody had seen Joel over the holidays – which in the United States, unlike the splurge in the UK, last only for Christmas Day – but on the night of Wednesday 26th, Penderek ate well, drank a small carafe of his favourite red wine, paid his bill, and left around nine in the evening by the side door. It was the last time anyone saw him, though nobody reported him missing until the following night when Debbie Mansell became alarmed, having heard no sound from her neighbour's house and noting that the blinds remained drawn. This was odd, for she usually heard the old man's radio every day.

When the local police broke in they fully expected to find a body. Instead, Joel Penderek's home was almost abnormally tidy, with little out of place, the bed made up and not slept in, the kitchen clean and neat without a pot or pan out of place and a scattering of junk mail uncollected in the box.

Nobody had seen anything strange, and that was the way it had been planned. What happened on the Wednesday night was never fully explained, but in reality the facts were simple. The old man had walked out into the car park alongside Ossie's, turning up his greatcoat collar against the cold and pulling his woolly hat down over his ears: a blue and white knitted concoction he wore like a badge of office – for nobody saw him without it in the winter.

Being slightly hard of hearing, Joe shut out sound completely with the thick hat, so he only became aware of the car pulling out from the other parked vehicles when it came abreast of him. The driver's window was down and the man at the wheel shouted, 'Hey, buddy. You tell us the way to Parmelee Avenue?' He brandished a map, and Joe pulled the hat from his right ear, took two steps towards the car and muttered something which sounded like, 'You want what?'

Then another man jumped him from behind, the rear door of the car sprang open and, in less than thirty seconds, the vehicle was just another set of taillights heading back towards Manhattan, but with Joel Penderek already unconscious in the rear, where a former medical orderly had plunged a hypo needle through three layers of clothing and into his right arm.

Nobody could possibly have foreseen that the abduction of an old man in New Jersey would be the prelude to a drama played out on the world's stage. Or that it was the first step in a plot, so ingenious and skilful, that the stability of nations would rock wildly to its adroit tune. One missing old man, and the fate of the free world would be at stake.

Even when they knew he was missing, none of his acquaintances in Hawthorne connected him with the big news story that broke on the Friday morning.

It came in over the wire services and was picked up by most of the national newspapers, while the major TV networks ran it as a third lead. If the Russian government had wanted to keep it quiet, they could not have done it, for the *Scales of Justice*, as they called themselves, made certain all the wire services had the text at exactly the same time as the Kremlin. The message was short and very much to the point.

Communiqué Number One: Fifty years ago, in June, the Jewish population of Kiev was brutally disposed of at Babi Yar. The chief executioner has long since been brought to book, but his assistant, Josif Vorontsov, a man of Russian origin, was never

taken into custody. We now have the criminal Vorontsov who has been masquerading as a citizen of the United States of America. We hold him safe in Eastern Europe and we are prepared to hand him over to the authorities. The new spirit which is abroad in our beloved land promises true and complete justice. We require the government to commit itself to a complete and unbiased trial of Vorontsov. The government must prove that it is still willing to right wrongs suffered in the past and we will hand the criminal over once we are assured that he will be given a full trial open to the world's press corps. The government has one week to comply.

It was signed simply *Scales of Justice*, in Russian *Chushi Pravosudia*.

Nobody seemed to have heard of the *Scales of Justice*, but the world's media were able to run and rerun the facts concerning Babi Yar. They also pointed to this new event as an opportunity for the true spirit of *perestroika* and *glasnost* to be fully active. Trials in the old Russian Empire had often been for show, or remained secret. Now, with *glasnost*, the government could demonstrate their impartiality by bringing to book the assistant murderer of so many Russian Jews.

The media also took note that the communiqué appeared to contain an unspecified threat, by giving a time limit for the judicial authorities to declare themselves willing and able to prosecute a mass murderer.

The Kremlin announced they were reviewing the entire matter, and would give an answer before the deadline set by the *Scales of Justice*, whoever *they* were.

It was not a huge, headline-grabbing story, but there was plenty of interest to keep it alive.

Nobody, not even the media, knew of the dilemmas which existed behind the political scenes. There was no way in which they could be aware of the controlled panic the *Scales of Justice* had brought about within the KGB, or the secret and alarming

interest suddenly expressed by the Israeli Mossad, or even the slew of signals that passed between Dzerzhinsky Square, Moscow, and the British Secret Intelligence Service in London.

If the media had caught a minute whiff of the confusion, the story would have quickly knocked most other subjects off the front pages, and the in-depth investigators would have been burrowing into those secret covens which still exist in all countries.

In London, the complete facts were not handed on until January 2nd, six days after the first *Scales of Justice* communiqué. But once the ball began to roll, *Fallen Timbers*, as it became known, took on a momentum of its own.

FALLEN TIMBERS

James Bond preferred the old ways, particularly when it came to the Registry files. There was something firm and honest, he felt, about going to Registry with his docket, exchanging the docket for a file encased in a buff folder, signing the file out, reading it and then passing the thick wedge of paper back to one of the nice young women who used to see to it that Registry ran smoothly.

All this had disappeared when the Service 'went decimal', as the jargon described the computerisation of its filing system. The nice young women were history, and though he was familiar, and literate, with computer systems, Bond never felt so positive about files which came seemingly from nowhere at the command of a series of keystrokes. It was, he considered, like a cheap magician's trick. He liked magicians, because sleight of hand and body was part of his stock-in-trade, but he did not care for the down-market, cheap variety. Their tricks, he thought, could usually be bought for a few pounds sterling, and that was no way to run a railway let alone the Secret Intelligence Service.

He felt all this now as he sat in the vile, white and hygienic cubicles off the main Registry work stations.

Bond had only been back on active duty since the beginning of December, following recovery from serious injuries received in the United States of America during his last operation, and things had changed greatly since then. Now, at the start of a new year, he had no desire to go out into his old European

haunts until the game of nations had returned to some form of status quo. He believed in the changes that were taking place, but not that the world had seen the death of Communism. He even seemed content to sit shuffling documents or following paperchases from his desk, though he suspected this initial sense of satisfaction would last only a short time.

He arrived at Registry's work stations via M's anteroom. Money Penny, the Chief's personal assistant whose security clearance bordered on the stratospheric, called down to say that their mutual lord and master had something he wished 007 to read. He did not even have his customary chat with M. Money Penny, who, after giving him the usual cow-eyed look, handed over a small blue slip – blue being the Registry colour for Most Secret and Above – on which had been typed two words: *Fallen Timbers*.

'We're on battles this month,' Money Penny gave him a glittering smile. 'Lucknow, Marne, the Somme, Arnhem, Blenheim. Fallen Timbers. You've probably never heard of it, but it *is* a battle. Plenty of belligerence.'

Bond raised an eyebrow, a smile turning up one corner of his mouth. 'Not for me I hope, Penny?'

She gave a mock sigh and reached out to retrieve the blue slip which she popped into a small desktop shredder with a terrible finality. 'Fighting with you could be rewarding, I should think.' She followed the sigh with a little moue, and Bond leaned across the desk to kiss her lightly on the forehead.

'You're like a sister to me, Penny,' he smiled, knowing her remark about cryptos being battles was to let him know the file was secret. New. Not some old case taken out to play with while Moscow and the old Eastern Bloc went through its varied agonies.

'I don't feel sisterly.' Money Penny never even bothered to hide the deep passion she nursed for Bond.

'Oh, come on, Penny, I don't want to add incest to injury,' and with a broad wink, he left the office.

At the Registry work station, Bond typed in his pass number, followed by the words *Fallen Timbers*. The impersonal screen told him to wait, then informed him that he was cleared for the file. Seconds later the printer started to spit out sheets of paper. There were seventy in all and the cover page bore the usual Most Secret ciphers and the subject heading *Scales of Justice*; Cross ref Josif Vorontsov, this file.

Most of the facts contained within the three score and ten pages were background: detail concerning Vorontsov's past and the recent abduction of the man called Joel Penderek from some obscure New Jersey town to, it was thought, a nameless point in Eastern Europe. (There were photographs attached, which meant that either someone had been doing his homework or the pix had already been in Registry for some time.) Then came some scant details regarding the organisation which called itself the *Scales of Justice*. These last were, if anything, sketchy, even conflicting. But finally, the meat within the file lay, not in the middle, but at the end. It was contained in two separate reports. One from the KGB, which appeared a tad muddled and indecisive, the second from the Israeli Service, the Mossad, which was terse, to the point, factual and not discomposed in any way. Bond was left wondering which report was more accurate, for distracted indecision could in the covert world be a cloak for clarity.

It took an hour to read and digest the file, after which the flimsy printed sheets were consigned to the large shredder by the door. The pieces rolled through into the burn bag which, he knew, would be removed within the next half-hour. Now, with much on his mind, Bond returned to his desk and informed Moneypenny that she could report to the Chief that he had followed instructions.

There was no waiting, and within ten minutes Bond sat on one of the straight-backed chrome skeletal chairs that M had recently installed during a refurbishing of his inner sanctum. He had noticed the changes to his Chief's office when reporting

back to work. He had wondered then if the new decor was a reflection of the massive shifts taking place in the world beyond the surreal existence they all shared in the anonymous, and ugly, tower block overlooking Regent's Park which was the headquarters of the Service.

The room had lost its old nautical flavour; even the paintings of great naval battles had disappeared from the walls, replaced by uncharacteristically insipid watercolours. M's desk was now a large steel and glass affair, tidy with heavy transparent In and Out trays, three different-coloured telephones, one of which looked as though it had been a prop in some Hollywood sci-fi epic, and a huge glass ashtray the size of a bird bath in which the Admiral had rested his evil-smelling pipe.

'Chairs're damned uncomfortable,' the Chief growled without looking up from the papers upon which he was working. 'Ministry of Works tell me they're more labour-intensive, if that's a real expression or more assassination of the English language. Suppose it means you're so damned ill at ease in 'em that you want to get up and out, back to the grind, in double-quick time. Won't keep you a minute, 007. Pictures are interesting.'

Bond took this as a hint so he left the chair and walked over to one of the watercolours. It was of a flat landscape that could have been Germany or some view of the Fens. Then he gave a little gasp when he spotted the artist's signature, *R Abel*.

'Nice, eh?' M grunted, his head still down as his gold fountain pen raced along lines of word-processed text.

'*The Colonel Abel?*' Bond asked, for Rudolph Abel had been one of the most successful Russian spies of the fifties, the man whom the Americans had eventually swapped for Gary Powers, the famous U-2 spy plane pilot shot down over the Soviet Union causing great distress to the Western Alliance.

M finally put down his pen. 'Oh, yes. Yes indeed. Bought 'em from Walter in Washington. Drove a hard bargain, but they're there to remind me of how things used to be, and how things are, if you follow my drift. Sit down, 007.' Walter was a legendary

former archivist of the American Service, and it was rumoured that his apartment was papered with rare, very collectable memorabilia of the Cold War. 'What d'you think of *Fallen Timbers*?' M glared.

'I gather it was a battle.' Bond returned to the discomfort of the labour-intensive chair.

M grunted again. 'Yanks. After the Revolution. Battle with Maumee Indians in Ohio. Don't learn that kind of thing in English schools these days.'

'Never did.' Bond adjusted his posture, realising the chair was more endurable if you sat to attention, which, presumably, was one of its design features.

'Anyway, *Fallen Timbers*. What d'you think?'

'Moscow Centre appears to be getting very concerned over a relatively straightforward matter. Old war criminal. Old history. Is it really this man, Penderek?'

'Appears to be. Just as it appears *not* to be, if we're to believe the Israelis.'

'They're usually right when it comes to war criminals. The Israelis have long memories, sir.'

'Quite. They've sent one of their best people over to brief us. He's *very* good, and we've let him into the inner circle. Y'see, I've had a request from Moscow. Quite extraordinary, when you consider the past history. They say they need two men. Russian speakers. I think you and the Israeli might fit the bill; do the trick for them. Your Russian still up to snuff, 007?'

'It was the last time I looked, sir.'

'Good. There's a possibility that you might have to go in and take a peep with the Israeli. Could be interesting, working for Moscow Centre after all these years of labouring in an opposing vineyard, so to speak.'

'Distillery, rather than vineyard, I would have thought.' Bond gave a quick smile, but saw that M was not amused. 'Can you expand on the Israeli theory?' He realised that he was asking questions just for the hell of it. The idea of being sent on

attachment, as it were, to the KGB, together with a Mossad agent, was quite alien to Bond.

'Not really. Only what's in the file.' M was scraping out his pipe with a metal reamer which seemed to have more tools attached to it than a Swiss Army knife. 'They're convinced, as you know. If they're telling the truth, the Israelis have had Vorontsov under surveillance for the best part of three years, and he's holed up in Florida. Again, if this is so, then these *Scales of Justice* people've picked the wrong man. The question is did they snaffle the wrong horse on purpose?'

'Why would they do that, sir?'

M frowned and raised his hands in an untypically Gallic shrug. 'How the hell would I know? Don't have a crystal ball, don't read the runes, don't sort through the entrails, don't dabble in ESP. Know as much as you do. Possibly the Mossad Johnny can tell us, but my gut feeling is that the people who really know are stewing in Moscow Centre. You'll probably be able to get it out of them if you have a mind to. After all, they appear to know something about the *Scales of Justice*, which is more than we do.'

'And our man from Mossad?'

'Peter. Likes to be called Pete. Pete Natkowitz. Incidentally, don't you think it's a shade strange that KGB hasn't brought the Yanks in? After all, this suspect, Penderek, was lifted right out of their bailiwick.'

'Perhaps Moscow Centre prefer to play with us . . .'

'Us and the Israelis. Strange bedfellows, what? Would've thought the US of A would've been called upon at some level.'

'You can never be sure with KGB, sir. Never could. What about the Mossad man, Natkowitz? When do I get to see him?'

M was now reloading his pipe, lost in some obscure ritual. 'Natkowitz? Any time you like. He's been here for the past twenty-four hours. Chief of Staff's been lookin' after him. Babysitting him, as they used to say. Actually he's had him down on the Helford estuary showing him how we operate in

shallow waters.' The Service still retained a small facility on the Helford estuary where trainees went through the rigours of scuba diving, clandestine water landings and all things connected with that kind of work. They had been there since the dark days of World War II and nobody had thought to close the place down.

'Getting his feet wet?'

'Who, Tanner?'

'No, the Israeli. Tanner already has webbed feet. We did the course together more years ago than I like to recall.'

M nodded. 'Yes, I think Chief of Staff said something about giving Mr Natkowitz the odd mouthful of seawater. Let's see if they're back.' He began to operate the sci-fi telephone console as though he had read and understood the copious manual that obviously came with it. Leisurely M pressed a button, then spoke as though into an answering machine. 'Chief of Staff,' he said.

From the built-in speaker there came the ringing of an internal phone followed by a click and Bill Tanner's voice saying a calm 'Chief of Staff.'

M gave one of his rare smiles, 'Tanner. M. Would you care to bring our friend up?'

'Aye-aye, sir.' Tanner was always inclined to use naval expressions around M. He had even been heard to refer to the Chief's office as 'the day cabin', and the shrewd old Admiral was, as often as not, amused by what he considered to be Tanner's peculiarities.

M continued to look at the phone. 'Don't like gadgets as a rule, but this is damned clever. You just say the name of the fella you want to talk with and the machine works it all out, dials the number and all that sort of thing. Clever as a performing monkey, eh?'

A few minutes later, Tanner himself stood in the doorway, ushering in a short, stocky man with sandy hair and bright eyes who, for some reason, reminded Bond of Rat in *The Wind in the Willows*.

'Pete Natkowitz. James Bond.' Tanner flapped a hand as he effected the introduction. Bond stuck his own hand out and received an unexpectedly firm shake that all but made him wince. There was nothing ratlike about Natkowitz close to. Just as there was nothing distinctly Israeli about the man's demeanour or characteristics. His complexion was that of a ruddy gentleman farmer, as were his clothes – cavalry twill slacks, soft, small-checked shirt with a frayed tie which looked regimental and a Harris tweed jacket complete with double vents and a flapped side pocket. He would have passed for the genuine article in an English country pub, and Bond thought to himself that there is nothing so deceptive as cover which matches a man's natural physical characteristics.

'So, the famous Captain Bond. I've read a lot about you.' His voice was soft with undertones of the drawl one associates with the British stockbroker belt – the kind of accent that is stuck halfway between East London and Oxbridge, a shade shy of the slur which pronounces 'house' as 'hice'. The smile was warm, almost 100 degrees in the shade, with teeth as white as fake Christmas snow. After all the physical come-on, he added, 'Mainly in top secret documents I admit, but it's all been good. Delighted to meet you.'

Bond controlled the urge to play games and say something about access to the Mossad's files already. Instead he merely smiled and asked if Natkowitz had enjoyed Helford.

'Oh, there's absolutely nothing like messing about in boats.' Natkowitz gave Bill Tanner a sideways glance and Bond went straight for the million-dollar prize. 'So, they want us to work for the Russians, I gather, Mr Natkowitz.'

'Pete,' he said, his face lighting up like Guy Fawkes night, or the Fourth of July, depending on which side of the Atlantic you are standing. 'Everyone calls me Pete; and, yes. Yes, I'm told we're going into the old badlands. That should be interesting.'

Bill Tanner coughed and gave M a quick look which said, 'Have you told them the bad news yet?'

M made one of his harrumphing noises which were often the advent of unpleasant tidings. 'Mr Natkowitz,' he began, 'I have no control over your decisions, but, for the sake of James, I must advise you both of the dangers, and your rights, in the matter we now call *Fallen Timbers*.'

The pause was long enough for Bond to register the fact that his old Chief had used his first name, always a prelude to fatherly advice, and usually a signal for him to beware of dragons.

'James,' M continued, looking down at his desk, 'I have to say that this operation *must* be undertaken on a voluntary basis. You can step down and walk away at any point before we begin and nobody'll think any the worse of you. Just hear me out on a couple of points, then give me your decision.' He looked up, clamping his eyes directly on Bond. 'It is our opinion that what we are going to ask of the pair of you could be damned dangerous. Also, Moscow is in an unconscionable hurry. Too quick off the mark if you ask me. But then, everyone has a right to be jittery. They've got the Baltic States. America and ourselves have the Iraqis – as indeed do you, Mr Natkowitz.'

Bond opened his mouth, frowning and puzzled, but M held up a hand. 'Hear me out first.' He made a grim little movement of the lips, half smile and half grimace. 'We'll tell you what we know, and Mr Natkowitz, here, will tell you what *he* knows. It's not a lot, and it leaves huge blank spaces. Dead ground, as it were.' Another pause, during which the only sound came from outside the building. An aircraft on approach to Heathrow. Bond's mind suddenly filled, unbidden, with pictures of disaster, wrecks and bodies overlapped and floated vividly in his head. These near nightmarish images were so clear that he had to make an effort to pull his mind back to what M was saying.

'The disappearance of an elderly man in New Jersey, followed by that puzzling communiqué from these people who call

themselves the *Scales of Justice*, seem to have caused unnatural concern in Moscow. They are asking for the pair of officers to sniff out the *Scales of Justice* and bring in this fellow Penderek. Specifically they've asked for two members of our Service with good Russian. The cover will be fully provided *in situ*. If this goes forward, I've agreed that we will not tell them that Mr Natkowitz has been made an honorary member of the SIS, which is fair enough because I have to admit that I'm leery of letting anyone go. Old habits die hard, and I cannot feel wholly happy about my people talking to their people, as they seem to say in business circles these days.

'Finally, and here's the rub, to do this properly, Moscow says you'll have to operate under *their* control, as it is a job none of their people can do. What's more they want you in Moscow yesterday, or more realistically, by tonight. It's all too fast and too iffy, but it might, just might, be of great importance to the continued freedom and stability of the world. You follow me?'

'Not really, sir.' Bond had already heard the warning bells ringing behind the technicolor pictures of disaster which he could not exorcise from his mind.