

THE HOODED MEN

It was Paul's first day at work and he waited nervously in the foyer of the college building for his new boss, Mr Tork, to meet him.

It surprised him that he'd never heard of this place before. He'd finished his A-Levels recently and had spent a lot of time researching further education courses in the area. Finally, he opted for a Philosophy degree at Huddersfield University but he'd somehow managed to overlook this college completely.

A man suddenly appeared in a doorway. 'Paul?' he said, extending a hand, 'sorry to keep you waiting. It's all a bit hectic at the moment; the school holidays are always busy.' Paul shook his hand and nearly yelped in pain as his fingers were crushed. 'Come in and we'll get started.'

The man's office looked like the typical bolt-hole of a college tutor. Papers were stacked on every conceivable surface; coffee mugs gathered mould on the desk; rickety shelves drooped with books – yet Mr Tork didn't quite seem to fit this environment. He was the right sort of age and was dressed appropriately in a shiny elbowed cardigan, but the way he carried himself was wrong. He didn't shuffle or slouch, he stood bolt upright and his movements were measured and controlled.

'Sit yourself down Paul,' he said. 'So glad to have you on board, we were very keen to get you.'

'Thank you very much but i'm a little confused about how you found out about me. I didn't apply for any job.'

'Of course not, of course not. You were headhunted. One of the teachers at your school recommended you - he acts as a sort of scout for us. The answers on your A-Level papers indicated that your psychological profile was ideal.'

Paul was slightly taken aback. 'But Mr Tork - '

'Oh, don't call me Mr Tork. That's simply a name we tell people to use so we know they're new recruits. Just call me Gobber.'

'Gobber?' said Paul, stunned. The man certainly didn't look like a 'Gobber'.

'Now, there are a few forms you need to fill in before we get started. It's red tape mostly but this one's very important. We can't do anything else before you've signed this.'

Gobber slid a sheet of paper across the desk that looked very intimidating. It had a regal looking coat of arms and lots of tiny squashed up lettering. The title at the top read 'Official Secrets Act'.

'Look, Mr Gobber - '

'Just Gobber, please.'

'OK, Gobber. I'm not sure what i'm doing here. I only agreed to take the job so that I could pay for my university course.'

'Don't worry Paul, it's nothing to be concerned about really. All this paper means is that you won't talk to anyone about what goes on here. The public see a lot of kids coming into this building and they need to think that it's just a normal college. We're not training you to be James Bond or anything, the work you'll be given is very easy and you'll be paid handsomely for it. All we ask is that you never speak about the nature of your job - even after you've left our employment.'

The friendly, comforting smile Gobber gave Paul set his mind at ease. It was a well paid job and those University fees *were* very expensive.

He signed the paper and handed it back.

'Excellent, excellent! Now we can set the ball rolling.'

Gobber took a folder out of a drawer and handed Paul more and more documents to sign. He could hardly keep up. 'What's this one?' he asked.

'That's your code-name,' replied Gobber.

'My code-name is *Tagnut*?'

'That's right. From now on, that's what you're called whenever you're here.'

'OK,' replied Tagnut.

'I think that's about it for now. Everything will be a lot clearer once you get started. You'll be accompanying Jez for a couple of weeks until you find your feet. There's no-one better to show you the ropes' said Gobber, standing up. 'Sorry to rush you off like this but I really am unbelievably busy. Any questions?'

'Just one thing. What's my job?'

'Jez will walk you through all that. He's a very bright lad.'

When they emerged back into the foyer a youth of about seventeen was waiting for them. 'This is Jez,' said Gobber. The youth smiled warmly. He was wearing a white shirt tucked into a pair of jeans that had a crease ironed into them.

'Don't worry Gobber. He's in safe hands with me,' said Jez.

'I hope so. Let me know how you get on when you submit your report,' said Gobber. Then he gave both lads a bone-crushing handshake and disappeared back into his office.

'What's your name?' asked Jez as he led them into what appeared to be a stationery cupboard.

'I think it's Tagnut,' said Tagnut,

The room was cluttered with college debris. When the door closed behind them they were left in total darkness until, suddenly, the whole back wall slid away and lights flickered on. In front of him was a steel staircase leading downwards.

'CS Lewis, eat your heart out,' said Jez, starting down them.

The basement room at the bottom of the stairs reminded Tagnut of the changing rooms at the swimming baths. There were several rows of lockers and some cubicles.

Jez went over to a pretty girl with dark hair who sat behind a counter reading a book and returned with a holdall.

'Here's your uniform. We weren't sure of your sizes but everything's baggy so you should be OK.'

Inside the holdall was a black hooded top, a pair of jeans, a burberry cap and some bright white trainers. Slightly bewildered, Tagnut went to a cubicle, put his own clothes into the holdall and changed into the new outfit. He didn't feel comfortable; the jeans were too large for him and barely covered his backside.

Jez was already waiting for him when he came back out. His shirt and immaculately pressed jeans were now gone, instead he was wearing a white hoodie with a logo on the front, a black scarf and some black jogging bottoms. 'Put your bag in there,' he said, holding open a locker. 'Here's the rest of your kit.'

Tagnut was given a mobile phone, a key and a plastic carrier bag containing four large bottles of blue alcopop. 'Don't worry,' said Jez, 'They're non-alcoholic. Just barley water and food dye, the lads upstairs mix it up for us. Fasten the key to the front of your top. It's to signal to the other lads that you're a rookie.' Then they set off along a long white corridor that was made dazzling by harsh fluorescent light.

They walked for several minutes until the corridor stopped abruptly in a dead end. There was only a ladder which appeared to lead to nowhere and a small black box set into the wall next to it. Jez took out a proof of age card and swiped it along a groove in the box. A red light came on. 'Security pass,' he said by way of explanation. 'You'll be given one of these soon. We just need to make sure the coast is clear outside.'

The light stayed red and Tagnut used the opportunity to fiddle with his new phone. He saw that there were several videos on there. The most alarming one showed a gang of hoodies attacking a middle-aged man. They clamoured around him like a pack of dogs, slapping his bald head as he struggled to defend himself.

'What the hell is this?' Tagnut asked Jez disgustedly.

'Oh, that one's brilliant isn't it? There's a theatre group called Chol that staged that for us. It looks really genuine.'

Before Tagnut could reply, the light changed to green and Jez went up the ladder. When he could reach, he pushed open a trapdoor in the roof and beckoned Tagnut to follow.

He came up into the daylight from the floor of a vandalised phone box. The glass panels of the box were shattered so that nobody could see inside and the phone dangled off its hook next to Tagnut's face. Jez advised him to grab hold of the receiver and pull himself up; the chord was specially reinforced steel and would easily hold his weight.

A few hoodies slouched around in the patch of waste ground behind the phone box and Jez nodded to them as they walked away along the deserted street. 'They're the lookouts for the secret exit. It's a decent shift if you get assigned to it. Sometimes they organise a Yahtse tournament.'

They hadn't gone far before Jez took out an ipod and placed the earphones in his ears. He explained that this was how instructions for the shift were supplied. Their movements were strictly managed and Gobber specified exactly where they should be at any given moment. A text message was sent whenever it was time to move on to another location.

'We're going to the Beast Market' said Jez. 'We're to hang around there for an hour and forty-five minutes before heading into the centre of town to drink our alcopop outside Borders.'

Their route took them past a music shop. Jez stopped to look at the cello in the window. 'Wow, look at that. That's totally mindy.'

'It's totally what?'

'Mindy. You know - it's *fragrant*, it's *wiggly*, it's proper *Kenneth*.'

'I don't have the first idea what you're talking about.'

'Street slang for 'good'. You'll be sent on a linguistics course soon enough but it'd be handy if you could start picking up some phrases now.'

From then on it was difficult to get Jez to talk about anything other than cellos. He'd been playing the instrument since he was seven and at the moment he was trying to master a particularly difficult Brahms concerto. He told Tagnut the correct way to grip the bow; which stance he favoured and a list of the composers he felt had a real understanding of what the cello could offer. His incessant talking was starting to make Tagnut feel as though he wasn't really there. To shut him up, he asked what exactly they were supposed to be doing.

'Just this mate. Hanging around places and making sure we're seen by plenty of people.'

'And that's it? We just walk from place to place and hang around?'

'Well, you can do more if you want to. Get an ASBO and they pay you a fortune. I got one last year and had enough to buy a cello case, a new set of strings and loads of sheet music.'

'But why? Who do we work for?'

'We're employed by the Government. The more we're seen, the more intimidated the public feel. We frighten people so much that they'll gladly swallow anything the government throws at them if it means we're kept under control. Extra taxes on booze and fags; CCTV; identity Cards; curfews; the DNA database - people would never swallow the erosion of their civil liberties like that if they weren't kept in perpetual terror by the likes of us loitering on street corners.'

As Tagnut was taking all this in, they were stopped by a woman who asked if she could take their picture. Jez agreed enthusiastically but the prospect worried Tagnut and he took Jez to one side as the woman set up her camera.

'Are you sure this is a good idea Jez?'

'Of course, it's great exposure. Gobber will love it.'

'But what if my parents see the picture? How do I explain why I'm dressed like this?'

'They'll never think it's you. Just pull your cap down and put your hood up. Here, have one of these' he handed Tagnut a cigarette.

'I don't smoke' he said.

'I know, but I haven't got any herbal cigarettes left. The lads upstairs usually roll them for us – they're completely non-toxic and look and smell like spliffs. You'll have to make do with this for the photo. Just hold it in your mouth so that your hand obscures the lower part of your face. No-one will recognise you.'

The woman said she was ready. When the photograph was taken Jez bobbed around in the background making the chord of A flat on an imaginary cello. Tagnut glared into the camera with the most menacing expression he could manage as he tried not to choke on the cigarette.

He didn't feel very menacing. He just wondered what on earth he'd got involved in.