

by K. Linden

Dr. Haggard ran his eye over the tabletop and smiled. Every chemical was in its place. He liked his laboratory spotless.

"Dr. Haggard?"

Haggard started and a beaker slipped from his hands, crashing to the floor. Brown liquid and broken glass covered the tile. He glared at the man who entered the room. "Mr. Thomas?"

"I know, Doc, and I'm sorry. Ring the bell, right? Just slipped my mind." The young blond man in the blue business suit began to pick up the larger pieces of glass and avoided the liquid. "Hope it wasn't anything important."

Haggard pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hands. "Afternoon tea, that's all. Over there, that's what you're looking for."

Thomas picked up the syringe Haggard had indicated. He whistled. "So this it it, huh?"

"Not quite. The process is a combination of physical and mental conditioning. The treatment is successful only with both."

Thomas put down the syringe. He reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a large manilla envelope.

"My money!" Eagerly, Haggard reached for it.

Thomas pulled back the envelope quickly and tapped it. "Half of the money. And...one more test."

Haggard scowled and turned away. "I've already proved that the process works. Four men..."

"Are dead...yes. Nicely done, too. But this is the test. If the process will work on this man, it will work on anyone. The...ah...gentlemen who have financed this work want to make certain that the process is universal...."

Haggard turned back to a bunsen burner, starting a new "pot" of tea. "I did say that the process will act differently, depending on the individual," he said guardedly.

Thomas patted him on the back. "Of course you did. And just to prove that everything's in good faith, we're prepared to double what you've asked...when you deliver the process. And after this one dies, of course."

Haggard smiled. "One million pounds? When would you like him dead?"

"Within a month."

"Consider it done." Haggard shook the man's hand, then accepted the envelope. "An agent?" he inquired.

"Just like the others. He works with the Home Office."

Haggard tossed the packet onto a counter. "All right. This agent...." He picked up the slip of paper in the packet. "Mike Gambit...will be dead within the month."

The beaker bubbled over furiously. Haggard put on an asbestos mitt. "Care for some tea?"

Gambit floored the car, sending it speeding through the forested area. He still didn't know what to make of that

phone call. The police said that there had been a car accident, there was a man trapped in the car who had asked for him by name, saying something about a "snatch".

He suddenly realized that there was a car coming at him, swerving from side to side as it sped down the road. There were no other cars in sight. Gambit hit his brakes and swerved. The car hit him broadside, pushing them both off to the left.

The car spun around, then collided with a tree. Gambit climbed from the wreckage, swearing angrily. He'd have a devil of a time trying to get the Home Office to repair the damage. He dusted himself off. It seemed the car had gotten the worse of the crash, for he didn't even have a scratch.

Two men moved from the front seat of the other car, there seemed to be a third man in the back. "Sorry, my steering locked," said the driver. "Can I give you a lift?"

"No, thanks anyway. A friend of mine lives just down the road. I can get a tow from there." Gambit eyed the bulge in the man's coat pocket, a gun.

The man continued toward him, followed by the passenger. "Are you certain that I couldn't drop you at your friend's house?" The man was an arm's length from Gambit when he drew his gun.

Gambit smiled. He stared into the man's eyes, then kicked the gun from the other's hand. The passenger moved up quickly. The man in the back still had not left the car.

Two on one odds didn't bother Gambit in the least. The men rushed him. He tossed one aside, but the other pushed him back against a barbed wire fence. He looked down. The palm of his hand had been torn open.

In the blink of an eye, the other man was down. Suddenly, he heard a swoosh and felt a sting in his shoulder. The third man was standing by the car, wearing a safari hat and armed with an air rifle. Gambit took a step forward, but the world seemed to turn upside down. He fell, unable to keep his balance.

The man patted the air rifle, then placed it gently back in the car. He walked across the shoulder of the road, rousing one of his companions as he passed. He turned Gambit over with his left foot. The man was unconscious.

"Royce, get him into the car." The man stared down at Gambit. Really, it had all been too easy.

The bell rang. Haggard opened the door and Thomas stepped in. "I remembered," he said cheerfully.

"So you did. You're just in time for the most interesting step of the process."

They stood before a glass window. Beyond it was a small room, the furnishings consisting of a screen, a chair, and a table. Thomas peered down into the darkness, barely making out the figure of their last "test subject". "So, what does this process do?"

"In layman's terms?" Haggard chuckled. "Yes, the reports have been very technical lately. To begin with, part of the human nervous system is called autonomic. This accounts for the unconscious actions of the body."

"Like reflexes?" asked Thomas.

"That and much more. For example, heart action and breathing are two of the more important functions. This system is composed of two other systems; the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. The sympathetic system engages during combat; increased adrenalin, rapid heartbeat, etc. The parasympathetic system involves another set of responses; it slows down the heart, opens tear ducts, etc. The drug I have synthesized prevents the sympathetic system from engaging and forces the parasympathetic system to work instead."

Thomas shook his head. "It sounds remarkable, doctor, but the gentlemen that I work for...."

"I know, they would like a more realistic explanation. Well, consider the change; suddenly, a man's heart slows, his eyes begin to water, his mouth grows dry.... Any man would assume that he is afraid. What we do is reenforce the drug with psychological conditioning. Watch the screen."

Thomas leaned forward. The man in the room below was strapped into a chair. On the screen before him was a film, a fox chasing down a rabbit.

"Do you see how cleverly the film has been shot? Everything is from the rabbit's viewpoint. The subject, hypnotized and drugged into semi-consciousness, will identify with the rabbit. He will feel a racing heartbeat, the harsh and labored breathing, even when his own heart begins to slow and constrict. He will understand his reaction as fear."

"But the doctors? What about a medical examination?"

"It only appears when the sympathetic nervous system is functioning at its utmost capacity. At any other time, the drug is undetectable. Normally, the subject's reactions would have been explained as fear. The doctors could not prove otherwise."

Thomas leaned back and stretched. "That is ingenious. But how does it kill?"

"The heartbeat is slowed because of the constriction of the heart. After two or more 'attacks', the heart will stop. The man would seem to have died of a heart attack. Of course, the exact amount of time it takes for the heart to reach that point depends upon the individual. The psychological reenforcement could break down as the drug dissipates...."

Thomas turned to look at him. "Which would mean that your process had failed."

"I did not say that it was perfect," cautioned Haggard. "Merely ideal. Besides, the odds indicate that only five or ten people in the entire world would be able to break the process. No, we have nothing to fear from that, Mr. Thomas."

Haggard rose and shook the other man's hand. "I have to tend to something. This man, Gambit, will be dead soon. I'll want my money then."

Thomas smiled. "You'll have it."

Groggily, Gambit pulled himself out of the car to survey the damage. The forward end had been totalled, he was lucky

to have escaped with nothing more than a bad headache.

The sky was dark. He frowned. The accident must have been hours ago. He glanced at his watch, but it had been shattered. There was blood on his hand.

He gritted his teeth as the ache that numbed his body became concentrated and focused in his hand. Ripping his shirt, he bound the wound. What a waste of a shirt. For that matter, what a waste of a day.

He set off in search of transportation. Suddenly, he smiled. Maybe the wound would get him some sympathy from Purdey. At this point, anything was worth a try. What more could happen to him....

The walkie-talkie crackled. "He's on his way," said Purdey.

"Check." Gambit looked down the hall, then ducked back behind the wall. "Remember, we bring him in alive."

"If possible," cautioned Purdey's voice. "He's a cold-blooded killer."

"The worst kind," added Gambit. He smiled. She hadn't said 'be careful'. She knew by now that it was redundant. He listened. "I hear him."

"Right. I'm on my way. Out."

He propped the machine against the wall. Steed wanted Gleason in one piece. If there was any way possible that could be accomplished, the man would remain in one piece. Hopefully, he could bluff the killer into backing down without a shot.

Hopefully....

Gambit stepped out, right into the running man's path, gun drawn. For a moment, everything seemed right. But that moment passed quickly.

His vision blurred momentarily, then everything was painfully clear. Gleason was a few feet from him, gun drawn.... There was no place to hide, no escape. Offense was an unimagined impossibility. Escape? But there was no place to run....

Gleason stopped in surprise. The man before him had dropped his gun, was falling to his knees. What was going on? Stunned, he turned to face the person who tapped on his shoulder and received an expert blow.

Gleason crumpled. Purdey picked up his gun, as well as her own. "Gambit, that was marvelous! And not a bruise on him, either. Well, he might have a headache when he comes to. Really, I didn't think you had it in you. Gambit...?"

Gambit hadn't moved. He was still on his knees, hunched over, his face hidden from view. Purdey felt her heart stop. What if Gambit's acting had been real? What if Gleason had a silencer and had managed to get off one shot?

Purdey leaned over, touching his shoulder gently. His head moved, he stared up at her, then fell to the ground in a dead faint.

Purdey stood up and backed away quickly. She shook her head in disbelief. The look she had seen in his eyes was one of absolute terror.

Steed leaned on the back of the chair. "What's wrong?"

"Absolutely nothing." Doctor Larsen eased himself into a chair behind his desk and motioned Steed to another.

Purdey prowled the room, examining charts and drawings on the walls. "And the tests?" she asked, without turning.

"Show completely what I suspected. Mr. Gambit is a completely healthy young man. A bit deficient in vitamin C, perhaps. The gash from his accident has healed completely, no infection whatsoever."

Steed sat down. "The accident? But that was over a week ago. Could something have happened, a concussion, perhaps?"

"Gambit did say he had been out for a while," noted Purdey. She sat down on a counter top, twisting the end of her chain belt in her hand. "It had to be at least three hours."

Larsen shook his head. "There were no signs of a blow to the head. From all indications, he might have been asleep at the wheel, especially since he doesn't remember the incident very clearly." He frowned. "Your people do keep late hours, Steed."

"Not that late." Steed paused thoughtfully. "I'm not certain that he fell asleep at the wheel, either."

"Why did he run off the road, then? There is the possibility that he's cracked."

Purdey snorted indignantly. "Gambit, cracked? Impossible."

"All the signs are there." Larsen picked up a pen and made random marks on the pad of paper before him. "He had an accident on a deserted road, ran his car into a tree, and can't remember the incident. Some psychologists would see that as a cry for help; a deliberate attempt to inflict harm upon himself. Why? To keep him from his job, from doing something that he can no longer handle. He's still professional enough to choose an area where no one else would be injured."

Steed smiled wryly. "Your explanation is fanciful at best, doctor. Gambit wouldn't do that."

"Perhaps," said Larsen doubtfully. "Maybe you're just too close to the problem, Steed."

"Well I definitely am," protested Purdey. She stood behind Steed's chair. "Mike Gambit has not cracked."

Larsen shrugged. "All right. Tell me, then...Some men lose their nerve in your occupation, occupational hazard. We've seen some of the best go down. Parkins, just last week."

Steed half rose from his chair. "Parkins, really? He'd be the last...."

Larsen cleared his throat, tossing his pen onto the table. "Do you see what I mean? What if Mr. Gambit did lose his nerve?"

Purdey shook her head. "He'd never accept it."

"Precisely. It would eat away at him, bit by bit. Little things, like the accident, would give hints about his condition. Finally, in a crucial situation, he'd explode. You may be dealing with a time bomb."

"And if I am?" said Steed cooling. He stood. "This is nothing more than conjecture, in any case. Will you sign him out?"

"If you'll take the responsibility...yes."

Steed leaned forward and shook Larsen's hand. "Thank you. You'll see, it'll all work out."

"For your sake and for your friend's sake, I hope so."

Purdey frowned and looked away.

"Come in." Gambit adjusted his tie, watching Steed and Purdey enter as he looked into the mirror. "Well, what's the word?"

Purdey strolled over and fixed his tie properly. "The word is that you're in disgustingly good health, physically."

Gambit smiled at her. "That's good." He paused when he received no response. "Isn't it?"

"Of course," answered Steed. "I just prefer to know why you blacked out."

Gambit ran his hand through his hair. "So would I. All I remember is coming to in that ambulance."

"You nearly wrecked the thing," accused Purdey.

"I had no idea where I was," defended Gambit. "That's the second time now and I'm not looking forward to a third."

"Dr. Larsen suggested that you take some time off, go on holiday. You've got more than a month of leave stored away," noted Steed, cautiously.

Gambit shook his head. "Not now, Steed. You've still got that murder to worry about...then that arms shipment will be coming through in fortyeight hours."

"Twentyfour," corrected Purdey. "But Steed and I can handle that."

"We've been working on that ring for months now," said Gambit firmly. "I want to be in at the kill."

Steed met Purdey's gaze and caught her slight nod. "All right," he conceded. "Provided that you take your leave immediately afterwards."

Gambit smiled. "I'll make arrangements this afternoon," he promised, already envisioning the beach, the sunset, and the girl.

It was after noon. The sun was out, for a pleasant change. It didn't seem to bother the five men who were loading bales of hay onto a truck. The scene seemed pastoral, harmless.

Steed sighed. The scene was not quite right. Two of the five men were wearing business suits. He shook his head; there was no eye for detail in the modern world of crime. Of course, that made his job much easier. But still....

Purdey stepped into view. He adjusted the binoculars slightly and watched the play unfold. Clothing pathetically grimy and torn, Purdey approached the men. Her hand pointed down the road when she was confronted by one of the men... could you please help...my car...off the road...all it needs is a push....

Steed silently applauded. Two of the men seemed very interested. A business suit waved them back, talked with her for a moment and, after some instructions to the crew, walked off with her.

Ten minutes later, Purdey was back. Presumably, Gambit had taken care of the first man and was in position. The rest of the smugglers seemed suspicious, the situation was rapidly growing ugly. This was Gambit's cue...but nothing happened!

Steed paused for a moment more, then, fearing for Purdey's safety, hopped into the car and headed for the scene.

Two of the smugglers advanced on Purdey, ignoring the car speeding toward them on the roadway. At the last minute, Steed swerved the car toward them.

Purdey grabbed the arm of one of her opponents, throwing him, then turned on the other before he could react. Steed drove between the truck and Purdey, cutting the smugglers into two parts. One of the men on the truck opened fire with a rifle, taking out Steed's windshield with one shot.

The car swerved, hitting the truck, knocking down one of the men from inside. He fell to the ground, then ran into the forested area that bordered the road, followed by the smuggler with the gun.

Steed got out of the car, brushing glass from his suit.

Purdey ran over to him. "Steed?"

"I'm quite all right." He looked at the car and grimaced. "I'm afraid the car's a loss."

"You were trying to help me," reminded Purdey.

Steed smiled. "We'll have it engraved as an epitaph; this vehicle valiently gave its life aiding a lady in distress." He looked around. "I noticed that Gambit didn't show. Where is he?"

Purdey frowned. "He should be here. Everything went fine...we knocked out Peres. Gambit took the gun and went beyond the cases to get them into range. Maybe Peres wasn't out...."

They ran over to the cases. Gambit was sprawled near the crates he was going to use for cover. Steed caught up with Purdey, who was checking Gambit's pulse.

"What's wrong?"

Purdey stood up angrily. "He's fainted! I walk into a set up and he faints!" She stalked away, Steed staring after her in disbelief.

Gambit paced the room. There was little in the bare cell to inspire confidence; the bars on the window and the lack of sharp objects merely aggravated the situation. They

thought that he was crazy.

"May be I am crazy," he mumbled. But he knew that he wasn't; his thoughts were coherent, he wasn't seeing strange animals or people.... But he kept fainting in dangerous spots.

Dangerous situations.... In his line of work, you didn't avoid them. You just take them one at a time, day after day until....

Until? Until you were killed.

Or your nerve gave out. Was that his problem, fear? He had every right to be afraid. Only dead men and lunatics weren't worried when a gun was pointed at them. Fear was always there, but you have to control it.

He had lost control.

A man who let fear overpower him, control him, was a coward.

Was he a coward?

No.

Gambit sat down, reasoning from square one again and again. He kept coming up with the same answer -

He'd cracked. He'd lost his nerve.

In a word, he had become a coward.

"I'm sorry, Steed." Larsen sounded and looked sincere.

"Thanks for not saying 'I told you so'." Steed paused hopefully. "No chance that it's a physical problem?"

Larsen handed Steed the report and sat down at his desk. He counted off on his fingers as Steed read. "Eye moisture, lack of saliva, shaking, abnormal increase in heartbeat, fainting.... It's textbook, right down the line. Maybe the psychiatrists can help your friend, given time. There's nothing more that I can do."

"I know, Larsen, and I thank you for it." Steed handed the sheaf of papers back to Larsen, but stopped and flipped through them. "Increase in heartbeat?"

"Yes. Why?"

"The ambulance report says that Gambit's heartrate was extremely low, increasing to normal by the time they arrived back here."

"That can't be," said Larsen. He stood up and walked over to the filing cabinet, opened a drawer and flipped through several files. Finding one, he opened it. "Hmn.... The same thing was recorded for the first incident. That would be unusual in such a case."

"Then it can't be fear," said Steed. "What can decrease heartrate?"

"About a hundred physical conditions and a dozen drugs available over the counter," said Larsen. "I didn't detect anything unusual in the first samples, but then I had no idea of what we might be looking for. Now...." Larsen turned to his desk and began to scribbled furiously. He looked up.

"Steed, I'll get back to you on it."

Steed nodded. "Thank you. In the meantime, I'd better look in on Gambit."

"Are you going to tell him what we've found?" asked Larsen. "After all, it may turn out to be nothing."

Steed paused at the door. "I agree. I won't tell him until we have something definite. No, I have other news to give him. Knowing Gambit, he won't be pleased."

Gambit stopped pacing when Steed came in. "Well, when do I get out?"

Steed paused. "I'm afraid that you don't. Not immediately, anyway. They want to keep you for a few more tests."

"Tests!" Gambit hit his fist into his palm. "They've had enough time for their tests. What about that murder? And the smuggling operation? I know it fell through, but they're certain to set up shop again...."

"No." Steed's voice was quiet, as well as firm. "You've been removed."

"From those cases?"

"From duty."

Gambit frowned and took a step backward. "I...see."

"It's only a medical leave," assured Steed. "Not at all permanent, unless.... Well, think of it as a paid vacation. Relax, you've been working too hard lately."

"Paid vacation," mumbled Gambit. He looked up at Steed. "Unless? Unless they can't find anything wrong with me, physically, that is. Unless they prove that I've cracked, lost my nerve. Is that it?"

"Gambit, give it time."

"I haven't lost my nerve," protested Gambit. "Time... Steed, how long have you known me? You know...."

Steed shook his head. "If it were my decision.... The order came from higher up."

"Higher up?" Gambit's eyes narrowed. "How high?"

"High enough. The Ministry wanted that smuggling operation, they needed it."

"An indefinite leave of absence," said Gambit bitterly. He turned away for a moment, then turned back to Steed again. "John, let me have a go at what's wrong."

"What ever you do here is your own concern."

"The problem is as sure as hell not here," said Gambit angrily. "Out there, that's where I can find out what happened."

Steed turned and walked to the door. "No. I'm sorry, but I can't allow that. I'll call later to find out how you're doing."

Gambit called after him, but the shouts and curses didn't seem to make much difference. He went back to square one... again.

Purdey opened the door hesitantly, then slipped into the room. Gambit was sitting on the edge of the bed, fully dressed, his head in his hands. He looked up and smiled at her when she entered.

"How do you feel?"

"As well as can be expected for a man who's been tried and convicted," said Gambit wryly.

"You sound as if it's a crime to be out."

"No, but it is criminal to be a coward."

Purdey put her hands on her hips. "You're not a coward!"

Gambit stood up and passed her, pacing across the room. He stopped suddenly and pointed at her. "Do you believe that?"

"Of course."

"That's two of us, then."

Purdey was furious. "You won't solve anything by moping around," she snarled.

"Precisely," announced Gambit. "Give me your gun."

"Why?" Purdey backed away, surprised.

Gambit moved toward her. "Give it to me."

"Not unless you tell me why," said Purdey, backing away.

Gambit shrugged his shoulders and walked over to the window. "They can't keep me here. How can I prove that I haven't lost my nerve if I'm boxed in here?"

"You can't," said Purdey.

"It's time I got out, then."

"Do you have any leads, anything to go on?" asked Purdey hopefully.

"The accident...it has something to do with the accident. I remember getting out of the car without a scratch, then waking up again with this," he traced the healing gash on his hand with his finger. "There was a gun...a rifle."

Purdey smiled. "They obviously missed."

"No." Gambit closed his eyes, thinking. "I was hit."

"What?"

"But it wasn't a bullet." Gambit opened his eyes, then snapped his fingers. "It had to be a dart or a needle of some kind. The man who fired it was wearing a hat...african thing."

"African?" Purdey sounded dubious. This was getting wierd.

"You know, the ones in the safari movies." He frowned. "Anything?"

"Maybe a tranquilizer dart, like they shoot big game with." She shook her head. "You're hardly big game, though."

"Thanks." Gambit paused. "What about that Austra Hemmings? He was a double agent for years, then went to work for them full time."

Purdey nodded. "It does sound like him. But he's free lance now. It'll take the Ministry computer to find him."

"I'm persona non-gratis," reminded Gambit.

Purdey frowned. "We'll have to talk to Steed."

"No," said Gambit quickly. "He's past that. He won't listen."

"He will," promised Purdey. She touched his arm. "Give him a chance."

"It's more than he gave me." Gambit breathed deeply. "All right, then. Let's go talk to Steed."

Steed hung up the phone. For an hour he had tried to get Dr. Larsen, but with no success. It seemed that the Ministry did have a line on a Dr. Haggard, who was thrown out of a state research program on heart conditions because of unorthodox experimentation.

There was no doubt in Steed's mind that something or someone had happened to Larsen. He'd do better at the hospital.

He caught sight of the second car in the driveway as soon as he closed the front door. There was the click of a rifle trigger being set behind him. He turned, smiling.

Hemmings didn't seem very pleased. "You seem to be expecting someone, Steed."

"It's a rare enquiry that doesn't produce some reaction," noted Steed. "I assume that this was arranged by Dr. Haggard?"

"For Haggard," corrected Hemmings. He gestured with the gun. "Get in the car."

Steed calmly walked down the stairs and opened the car door, Hemmings behind him. Instead of sliding in, he pushed the door back against Hemmings and ran.

Hemmings brought up the rifle and fired. Steed paused, stunned, then fell to the ground. Hemmings drove the car over to where Steed had fallen and dumped the body in the back seat. Just as he slid into the front seat, he saw another car, in his rearview mirror, that pulled into the driveway. He sped away as the other car moved into view.

The strange car before them roared, spitting gravel as it sped off. Gambit leaned forward, peering into the car. Then, he spotted Steed's bowler on the ground. "It's Hemmings, he's got Steed."

"Right," said Purdey. She tore after the other car. "He won't get away from me!"

Gambit leaned back in the passenger seat, fuming. "He won't get away from you, huh?"

"I can't believe we lost him," moaned Purdey. She scanned the empty road ahead of them. "It has to be here."

"He could have pulled in somewhere and backtracked," suggested Gambit.

Purdey shook her head. "There's nothing out here but a Game Preserve. We could stop in. Maybe they've seen something." Gambit stared at Purdey. "Rabbits."

"Pardon?"

"Rabbits!" he said. "Purdey, they have rabbits at a place like that. And foxes."

"So?"

"That's where they took me after I was drugged. Every time I've...I remember rabbits. And a fox."

Purdey looked dubious. "Are you certain?"

"As certain as I can be. What have we got to lose?"

"You're right."

The car turned into the parking area in front of one of the buildings. They both got out of the car.

Purdey paused.

"Let's go," said Gambit.

"No. You can't go."

Gambit slammed the car door. "I'm not staying here."

"And what happens if you.... You might get us all killed." Purdey looked at him thoughtfully.

Gambit turned away. "It won't happen again."

"Can you be certain of that?"

"No." Gambit opened the car door again. "All right. But if you're not out here in fifteen minutes, I'm going in."

"You'll call the police," instructed Purdey.

"Purdey...."

"What could you do? It's better this way. Promise me you won't do anything foolish."

"I can't promise that." He stared across the roof of the car at her. "I'll give you fifteen minutes."

Purdey wanted to argue further, but she knew she wouldn't win. She turned and walked up the steps, drawing her gun from her purse.

The outer office was empty, although the trappings seemed innocent enough; some desks and filing cabinets, the walls covered with assorted animal pictures, a potted fern or two....

Purdey went to a door behind the main desk. It contained a stairwell, leading upward to the second floor. She closed the office door quietly.

A door on the floor above closed. Someone was coming down the stairs.

There was an open doorway to one side of the stairwell. Purdey ducked into it, gun ready. She relaxed when the office door closed. That hadn't been too difficult.

She stepped back into the hall, then looked at the place where she had taken shelter. It was an alcove, a pair of black metal doors. It looked promising.

She took a step toward them, then froze. The man had never left the room. He grabbed her arm, taking her gun, then motioned her toward the doors.

Fifteen minutes and twenty seconds. Gambit got out of the car. He slipped his hand down under the glove compartment, pulling out the second gun that Purdey had hidden in her car. He smiled. Had she known? He stopped smiling. Maybe she knew where he kept the guns in his car....

The front door seemed too obvious. He slipped around to the back of the building. Granted, he often thought the straight frontal assault was the best tactic in the books, but only if you had a backup.

This time, he was the backup.

The building was small, too small for an operation of any decent size. Nothing seemed unusual about the white boarded structure, there were two windows, a back door, and the door to a storm cellar. The cellar doors were locked, bolted, and

chained. Perhaps the caretakers were over-cautious.

He doubted it.

The other buildings housed only animals. It seemed to be business as usual about the place. He withdrew as a worker approached a toolshed to one side of the building. An unusual hum accompanied the opening of the doors. He heard the man pass through, the doors humming again as they shut behind him.

Gambit glanced around the yard, but there was no one nearby. He stood before the front of the shed and ran his hand down one of the mouldings. He stopped at the small bump and pressed it.

The door hummed, then slid to one side. Gambit smiled as he stepped inside. He pressed a button on the panel at random. It was a rather impressive toolshed.

He slipped out of the elevator, into the hall. It was dimly lit. He didn't mind that at all. He heard movement and flattened himself against the wall.

Hemmings walked past the corridor Gambit was in, whistling as he moved. He entered a room through a set of double doors at the end of the hall. Gambit followed at a distance.

Gambit peered through one of the glass windows. Hemmings had his rifle and was standing next to Purdey, who was tied to a chair. Two other men stood at a lab table, one in a white lab coat and the other in a business suit. Steed was slumped in a chair, probably drugged.

Suddenly, the world began to spin again. "Not now!" he cursed under his breath. "Damn it, not now!" He was in the open, easy to spot. If he didn't move immediately, he'd lose what little surprise that was on his side.

He stumbled forward through the doors, gun drawn.

Hemming pulled his gun upright, but the man in the labcoat shouted at him. "No! Don't fire!"

Gambit felt detached, removed from the scene around him. He had to move, had to go on.... But he couldn't.

Haggard smiled. "See, Thomas? You ask me for proof? You shall see the proof with your own eyes."

His legs crumpled beneath him. Gambit caught himself with his arms, then collapsed totally. His heart pounded in his ears, the beat slowing, fading. Every instinct he had told him that he was dying. He was afraid and he was dying.

But he couldn't die! Purdey and Steed were here, if he died, they died!

He fought for his breath, each one becoming easier than the last. His heart no longer pounded in his ears, but sped up. Through half-closed eyes he could see Haggard and Thomas. Haggard was filling a needle from a testtube and was moving towards Steed.

Gambit tightened his grip on the gun. He fired.

Haggard screamed and dropped the syringe as the bullet entered his arm. Thomas moved back, drawing his own gun.

"Don't try it!" called Gambit.

Thomas dropped the gun.

Gambit heard a rifle click and froze. Hemmings....

Purdey laughed. He looked up.

Hemmings was sprawled at her feet. Her ropes dangled from the chair. She smiled. "Hell of a marksman, but no good with

knots."

Gambit sighed. One of these days she was going to give him a nervous breakdown.

Purdey perched on the desk, waiting.

Steed hung up the phone. "Dr. Larsen is fine. Hemmings locked him in a closet, obviously intending to finish the job later." He cleared his throat. "Can't say that I blame him."

"Steed!" said Purdey, scandalized. She smiled. "At least it's over now, isn't it?"

"Haggard has been shut down for good and the Ministry of Health is very interested in the drug he invented. Thomas and Hemmings were wanted on other charges, so they'll be away for a very long time." Steed leaned back in his chair and propped his legs up on the desk. "Yes, I'd agree that it's all over."

"That isn't what I mean." She lowered her voice. "Will Gambit be all right?"

"He's cured. It seems that psychological conditioning hinged on hypnosis. Larsen used more hypnosis to counteract it. Don't worry."

"I'm not," said Purdey indignantly. "By the way, where is he going on his vacation?" She leaned closer to Steed. "He won't tell me."

Steed frowned. "Well, if it's confidential...."

"You don't have to tell me, just yes or no will do. Is he going overseas?"

"No...."

"Steed?" Gambit walked into the study and tossed Steed a set of keys. He smiled at Purdey. "Beseiged."

"Purdey wants to know where you're going on your vacation. I didn't have the heart to tell her that you're going hunting."

"Hunting?" Purdey leaped off the desk, furious. "Gambit, how could you? It's true, you're going hunting?"

Gambit smiled. "In a way, yes." He waved to Steed. "Thanks for the bait, Steed."

"Anytime."

"Bye Purdey."

Purdey ran after him, grabbing his arm. "Mike Gambit, you wait one minute!"

Gambit smiled innocently, turning toward her. "Yes?"

"Explain!"

"Explain what?"

Purdey put her hands on her hips and tapped her foot on the floor. "Where were you just now?"

"In the winecellar."

"Getting bait?"

"Of course." He shook his head in mock disappointment.

"You know me, Purdey. I'm a sportsman, not a butcher. I like game that fights, especially of the female variety." He picked up two glasses and left.

Steed laughed.